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# Learning from Experience in Employer Engagement

Edited by Professor Freda Tallantyre and Jane Kettle, Higher Education Academy

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## Employer Engagement Project Lessons

Professor Freda Tallantyre

As part of a theme concerning the contribution that Higher Education makes to the economy, the Higher Education Funding Council for England has funded from 2007 a range of Employer Engagement projects across 39 higher education institutions (HEIs) in England. These projects were supported to encourage the development and delivery of employer responsive provision for which employers themselves would be prepared to pay up to 50% of the costs – a concept formerly described as co-funding. The projects had an eclectic mix of foci, and received widely varying shares of the £60 million dispensed. Some were conducted by institutions already very experienced in the business, while others were conducted by those relatively new to the game. Moreover, they were not alone in the field of business development. Not only had many institutions been in receipt of HEIF funding for some years, but HEFCE simultaneously supported a range of complementary projects, including:

- a number of co-funding projects which received no development funding but only funded numbers
- three regional Higher Level Skills Pathfinders (designed to enable HEIs to work together on employer responsive provision)
- a sprinkling of 3rd Stream 2nd Mission projects (for those prepared to make business development a key part of their institutional strategy)
- many regional Lifelong Learning Networks (which trialled collaborative vocational provision and cross-institutional credit frameworks)
- and, after the onset of the economic crisis, a set of Economic Challenge Investment Fund (ECIF) projects, designed to enable HEIs to support businesses in danger of shrinkage or collapse.

From 2008, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) was funded by HEFCE to convene on their behalf a national network of the Employer Engagement projects to enable the exchange of lessons learned, in the hope of accelerating and deepening outcomes. We endeavoured also to connect learning from the other suites of projects, to the extent that the network was eventually broadened to include the Higher Level Skills Partnerships and 3rd Stream 2nd Mission participants. Part of the intention from the outset was to gather learning to be disseminated to other institutions which had not benefitted from the development funding but nevertheless wished to embark upon employer responsive provision. The network became known as the Employer Engagement Exchange Group

We began to plan a publication which would draw together lessons learned. We decided to leave aside some pressing concerns, which were being addressed by other groups, such as:

- developing institutional strategy, which was the focus of an HEA publication by PVCs concerned with business development and employer engagement
- quality assurance of employer responsive provision, which was being addressed by a series of specific projects supported by the HEA and QAA.

Nevertheless, we identified a range of themes in which there was a common interest, including in particular:

- Engaging the University, its staff and employers
- Engaging learners (by new pedagogies and approaches)
- Getting the offer right (curriculum, bridges, flexible award frameworks).

These became aspects around which individual or collaborative chapters were produced.

We decided to document specific lessons in detail, whether they were intended or accidental, rather than to give overviews of whole projects, which will be captured separately in project reports. It was our hope that in this way we would reflect the excitement of well evidenced findings or innovative solutions.

Some of the purposes of the projects have become anachronistic with the new policies and strategies of the Coalition Government formed in 2010. For example the entire concept of co-funding is now an irrelevance when public funding is largely withdrawn from higher education, and all learners or their sponsors are bound to find their own fees, now or later. It remains to be seen what employers will be charged for provision to meet their needs, and whether they will pay. Will this kind of provision be a welcome alternative market to institutions suffering a decline in full-time young undergraduates, or will it be perceived as an expensive distraction? In 2011, the answers to these questions are unknown.

However, we believe the Employer Engagement projects researched some approaches which will bear the test of time and help to advance pedagogical and curricula innovation. For example, the first section demonstrates several ways to win hearts and minds of University staff to new ways of working, and how to work across the boundaries of institutions and organisations for mutual objectives. The second section explores how to make learning accessible to adults who are in employment and who require a greater flexibility than traditional full-time students. The third section proposes new kinds of curriculum and awards to suit the interests and learning pace of adult learners.

We trust that other institutions will find much here to support them in their own learning journeys towards increased flexibility.

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We acknowledge the commitment and contributions made by all members of the HEA's Exchange Group over the last three years, in particular those who have contributed the chapters in this collection.

## I. Universities Engaging with Staff and Employers The University of Derby Corporate offer to employers

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### Introduction

Why do employers need to engage with higher education establishments? What can the higher education 'offer' provide to employers that can make a difference to their business and ultimately improve their bottom line? These are the questions that have been explored and challenged during our first two years of operation. This chapter provides an analysis and critique of the establishment and first two years of operational implementation of the University of Derby Corporate (UDC) from 2008-09 to 2009-10. UDC is the approach undertaken by the University of Derby in establishing itself as a lead institution in the UK higher education sector for employer engagement and for the development and delivery of higher level work-based learning solutions. The chapter covers the origins of UDC, which is based on demonstrated institutional strengths and a track record of success in connecting university-level learning with the world of work.

The UK's response to the higher skills agenda has been most prominently articulated in the 2006 Leitch Report. Despite recent improvements, the UK's skills base remains "mediocre by international standards" (2006, p. 39), equivalent to eighth out of 30 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The report outlines that for higher education, targets require the achievement of more than 40% (aiming for 45%) of the adult workforce qualified to Level 4 (the entry stage of HE) and above by 2020.



The scale of this proposed undertaking is demonstrated by the fact that the current figure for achievement at Level 4 or higher is 29% and that 70% of the 2020 workforce have already finished their formal education. The emphasis is placed firmly on employers and training providers to move this agenda forward. The challenge for the University of Derby (UoD), among others, was to provide a way for employers to access higher levels of education and training and enable them to meet these challenges.

Aimed at learners within the workplace, UDC was set up to create a work-based learning offer to persuade more employers to enter into partnership with the University and to allow the University to more effectively meet national agendas on employer engagement and skills development. Tolleyfield (2008), presenting to the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) Conference, makes the point that the strategic challenge set for higher education in responding to Leitch remains to develop:

*...an economy of explicit business driven demands for high skills from employers... met by responsive, flexible, results-focused provision delivered by highly adaptive HE providers.*

While the requirement for the UK to remain internationally competitive is the policy imperative, and an increase in higher level skills in the workplace is seen as the way to achieve this, there remains a question of resource. A key driver of the implementation of policy is to shift costs away from the state alone to a shared responsibility between the state, the employer and the employee.

The following discussion around the UDC response, proposition and curriculum design, goes some way in sharing the learning points and poses further questions about the interface between higher education and employers.

### Drivers for the development of University of Derby Corporate

The external environment (the current economic climate, the political imperative to cut public spending and the nation's economic need still to achieve the Leitch targets (2006)) has reinforced the need for UoD to continue to establish itself as a provider of choice within the employer engagement marketplace. UoD had recognised for some time that traditional HE models needed to be adapted in response to changing demographics and a predicted rise in the volume of higher level skills needed by UK companies to be internationally competitive. The challenging targets for growth in Level 4 achievement proposed in the Leitch Report (2006) required a step change in the volume of HE/business collaboration on workforce skills development.

With such clearly identified policy drivers it was an inevitable and logical next step for UoD to designate this area as mission critical, with all that this implies in relation to the proactive engagement of the most senior managers in driving the agenda forward. The change of government in 2010 and the need to keep a tight rein on public spending, with the resultant impact on university income, would suggest that the employer engagement agenda will continue to be a key issue for all higher education institutions.

However, while the skills imperative remains a key component of the competitive agenda, the marketplace remains elusive for a variety of reasons. These include:

- the current adverse economic climate;
- the reluctance of some businesses to engage with HE;
- the complexity of developing fit-for-purpose learning solutions for business.

Stimulating the marketplace remains high on the agenda, along with raising awareness through impact-driven case studies that clearly demonstrate added value to both the business and the employee. There is a need for income diversification for UoD, making full cost recovery from employers a priority.

The employer engagement agenda is an integral part of the University's vision; it is championed by the Vice-Chancellor and is a key strategic objective for UoD. Employer engagement has been part of the UoD portfolio for the last ten years, helping to position the University as a significant player in this field of academic practice. During this time a number of key developments have enabled effective University-level work-based learning to be offered. For example, in December 2000, the Lifelong Learning Scheme was created. This accreditation framework was designed to facilitate UoD in supporting and assessing negotiated learning with a particular focus on the work-based aspect. The scheme allowed academic accreditation of work-based activity from level zero to taught doctorate.

Combining the imaginative use of our e-learning platforms (e.g. e-APEL (Minton and Malone, 2009) and the Intelligent Shell System) and flexible framework provision, UoD is able to provide tailor-made and contextualised work-based learning environments online, thus providing a way to engage with workplace learning without having to fit into normal attendance patterns required by many universities.

Although the institution was achieving success and growing its business within the field of employer engagement and flexible work-based learning, it was recognised that challenges remained. These included the fact that, while academically robust, faculties were not sufficiently 'fleet of foot' to be commercially responsive.

Further, our central systems, though sophisticated, were not fit for purpose for the employer engagement agenda. There was also a perception of universities as remote and ‘not for us’ by the business community. Our own market research indicated that employers saw universities as being either unapproachable or only concerned with the full-time undergraduate market. The other key challenge for the institution was scalability and the capacity to sustain the anticipated growth in numbers of work-based learners – both vital strategic requirements if the strategic objective of employer engagement is to be achieved.

### Launching University of Derby Corporate (UDC)

The launch of UDC moved UoD into the next phase of employer engagement and workforce development, providing a demand-led commercial operation that offers a demonstrable higher level learning proposition. Building on the existing strengths that have been developed and nurtured across the University in the area of work-based learning has enabled a strong business and academic model to be devised and implemented. This model brings together key ingredients to ensure a robust, sustainable, academic, commercial, employer-facing operation that delivers impact solutions.

Expressed in these terms the development sounds like a smooth, unproblematic incremental journey to the happy lands of increased employer engagement, greater student involvement and increased revenue for the University. However, the establishment of UDC has highlighted issues on a number of levels. These have included the set-up and operation of the business, relationships with the academic community and the culture of the organisation, together with business perception and the development of fit-for-purpose learning solutions.

The underlying challenges included lack of commercial awareness, adaptability and the ability to transform traditional academic practice with new, innovative, work-based solutions that demand the team and institution to think and respond differently.

We have framed our critique of these issues in the following sections:

- The UDC proposition: putting business first;
- UDC: set-up and operation;
- UDC: relationships with the academic community;
- UDC: curriculum design for business solutions.

### The UDC proposition: putting business first

The role of UDC is to expand UoD's market share for higher level learning by reaching, through their employing organisations, potential learners who would not traditionally pursue university-level learning. We are also very interested in capturing activity within organisations that is at Level 4 or above but not recognised as such. If knowledge and skills learned in the workplace keep businesses and organisations going, then the new knowledge and skills developed there enable businesses and organisations to grow.

The whole operation puts the employer as customer at the heart of all thinking, systems and processes. Since UDC only services business-to-business activity and all solutions developed are work-based, the UDC offer does not compete with core University business. It is clearly differentiated in its offer of learning opportunities designed to generate work-related knowledge and for learners to apply this knowledge in workplace contexts. We want to ensure that employees receive an inspiring learning experience that adds real value to their personal and professional development.

Croda International Plc are a FTSE 250 company producing speciality chemicals for a variety of industries. By working with their training manager to accredit their existing and successful in-company New Manager training programme, UoD has developed a partnership with an employer where the ethos and philosophy of the company is embedded within the teaching and learning strategy of a higher education programme. The learning is not only fit for the business purpose, developing the management capability and capacity of the Croda workforce, it is also aligned to higher education level descriptors, and work-based activity is assessed according to HE standards, with direct impact on the business and the learners. The learning is delivered in the workplace, on the job, and links directly to key issues experienced by new managers as they undertake their duties. The success of the programme and partnership has been recognised "as an outstanding contribution and commitment to training and development in the workplace" and received a Yorkshire & Humber National Training Award from UK Skills in September 2010.

While every UDC learning solution is bespoke, this does not mean that every development is ‘new every time’. Rather, we have a portfolio of distinctive tools to enable us to develop a variety of customised and cost-efficient learning solutions for business. These tools – analytical, developmental, technical and evaluative – are deployed as required in partnership with the client to satisfy learning challenges of the organisation and ultimately to improve its bottom-line performance.

Showsec are a crowd management company, working on major indoor and outdoor events including the MEN Arena and Download Festival. They employ 100 full-time staff and approximately 2,000 people on a contracted basis. The company is in a highly competitive market but view people development as the key to their future success.

Showsec launched an Academy programme in 2008 that consisted of vocational Level 3 programmes. However, they felt the programmes did not meet business objectives and wished to work with an HEI who could develop and deliver a bespoke programme for new and existing middle managers.

Consequently, UDC validated a foundation degree in Applied Professional Studies as the capstone award via the University’s Lifelong Learning Scheme framework. The programme was not designed for unilateral adoption of the major awards; instead there are five minor awards to ensure that the programme is manageable for employees and meets the immediate business needs of the organisation.

For example, the new employees must complete Year 1 of the FdA, while existing Operations Executives can choose a path that suits their development needs.

This learning solution drew upon existing skills within the University in management training. University academics were able to adapt a range of learning interventions to meet the needs of the client, without having to ‘reinvent the wheel’. A needs analysis provided the vehicle for drawing upon existing learning resources and provision to place within the overall learning package devised for the company.

## UDC: set-up and operation

UDC is a highly visible initiative, which, essentially, runs as a devolved structure, functioning within the parameters of mainstream University procedures. The changes that have been necessary to move the business to a fully commercial operation have been significant.

Diversification of income streams for UK universities is one of the key drivers behind the employer engagement agenda, as discussed above. The investment that UK businesses make into training and skills development is significant at an estimated £39 billion a year (Learning and Skills Council, 2007). The task for HEIs generally is to apply strategies for increasing their share of this investment.

The approach undertaken by UDC has been to position the UDC proposition as a premier product, applying a fully commercial approach to the marketplace. This therefore demands a full understanding of all the costs of operating a business and all costs associated with each solution developed.

The price of learning solutions is derived and influenced not merely by the cost base, but from a number of relational factors such as market expectations and norms, the competitive environment and the strategic fit of the business solution. It is imperative for the long-term development of workforce learning that the impact created and the benefits achieved to the client's bottom line have a transparent return on investment, so that premier pricing for a premier product reflects value for money.

We feel that, as well as being responsive to market demand, we also have a market-making task to achieve. We need to educate businesses to an awareness that, while investment into bespoke accredited work-based provision may appear expensive, the actual benefits to the company are significant and measurable.

A further challenge is presented in educating academic staff in relation to the commercial realities of pricing and value for money – as often, their inclination is to underprice, thus undervaluing the provision.

The finance systems for UDC operate within the central systems of the University, but they have been modified to enable a commercial service to be provided. All customer communication is managed by the UDC team. This includes invoicing, debt collecting and queries. The approach has proven to be highly successful, ensuring that UDC as a business is located within the overall finances of the University, but that the actual customer face of the UDC business operation is owned by UDC.

Effective customer support and service is critical in developing a sustainable competitive advantage particularly in business-to-business situations. Customer intimacy is a recognised strategic stance (Treacy and Wiersema, 1995). With rapid knowledge creation, increasing expectations regarding responsiveness by customers and an increase in technological capabilities, getting closer to the customer could be argued to be easier. However, achieving and sustaining the high standards of service demands constant investment in both systems and people.

Developing the commercial infrastructure required a realistic approach. Using the main University systems would ensure continued investment, but they had to be made fit for purpose. The management of information had to be good, reliable, timely and accurate, enabling us to provide a first-class service. Significant work was undertaken to ascertain the fit between commercial demand and current systems and, through this, it was evident that the systems were flexible and capable of satisfying our requirements. More importantly, the organisation was keen to make this work, and the word 'no' has not been used; just 'how?'

Systems development has been highly complex, since each facet of operation has a network of relationships. Our first challenge was being able to accurately identify the information needed, its source, purpose and value chain impact. A detailed mapping process enabled us to plot the learner journey from start to finish and identify the key operational stages and requirements.

Once this had been outlined, the next challenge was to identify the systems required, both from a technical perspective and, just as importantly, from the human perspective. It has become evident from our findings that implementing a devolved system while operating within the parameters of the University's mainstream procedures was a sound strategy to undertake. Some of the key components of system development in UDC's start-up period have been:

- a customer relationship management tool;
- a customer and delegate portal;
- the capture of delegate information relating to enrolment, assessment, retention and achievement;
- a learning repository containing reusable curriculum resources.

## UDC: relationships with the academic community

UDC is a practical response to enable the University to connect with modes and sites of higher level learning and knowledge production outside the normal boundaries of the institution. UDC seeks, through a robust quality regime, to establish and retain the high social status and value traditionally associated with university-level programmes (Whitemore and Minton, 2010).

The principles of the UDC academic quality assurance approach are that it is risk-based, and that, from this analysis of risk, proportionate, fit-for-purpose validation and approval procedures will enable and support a timely response to meeting client need. A stereotypical view may suggest that academics are unwilling to engage with the challenge of work-based learning. While there is not universal acceptance of this new initiative, the tensions are not always as obvious as might be thought at first and indeed, some academics in all disciplinary areas have shown themselves interested in and supportive of UDC developments.

UDC and its team of specialists in work-based learning are able to draw on the expertise of a wide pool of academics across the institution. Working in partnership with faculties, UDC can deploy complementary academic expertise to promote and develop the University's employer engagement agenda by developing bespoke and responsive higher level learning solutions. While UDC is the catalyst for attracting the business, the faculties are always closely involved and are effectively 'commissioned' to deliver the work required.

It is understood that higher level learning occurs within the workplace on a daily basis; this is not disputed by most academics. The difficulty is in the translation, assessment and evidencing of that learning and it is this that brings the debate, discussion and the academic tensions to the surface. Satisfying this complex area of debate is proving to be an interesting journey within itself.

An important aspect of the links between UDC and faculties are the Workforce Development Fellows, whose appointment sets out an academic career path in work-based learning for such enthusiasts.

Six Workforce Development Fellows (WDF) – one attached to each faculty and two based within UDC – were appointed as UDC was established.

Appointment as a WDF recognises high-level capability and professional expertise in the development of collaborative relationships with local, regional and national employers. Within the University, WDFs sit in parallel with Teaching Fellows within the existing, highly successful UoD Teaching Fellowship Scheme, which was implemented in 2004 to recognise, develop and reward excellence in teaching and learning. Recognising



that employer engagement is a specialised and fast-developing field of academic enquiry within which individuals need to make a sustained professional commitment, WDFs were appointed to full-time positions and charged with having organisational impact both within their client companies and also within the University.

Their role sits at the interface between faculty academic staff, UDC and the workplace. In particular, they are engaged in developing new pedagogies and learning techniques that are suitable for workforce development. Their role is also to embed these in faculties and to lead staff development programmes within the field. The work of the Fellows is underpinned by research that they undertake in this field (Morton and Young, 2010).

As a new breed of academic – they might usefully be termed ‘academic entrepreneurs’ – their role is a challenging one. They are charged with leading the culture change in academic centres. Business facing, they bring academic skills and experience to bear on the HE/employer interface in relation to both wide, generic abilities in work-based learning as an academic field of study and their own disciplinary perspectives. Such activities, which are impact-driven rather than product-driven, demand very high levels of skill and competency on the side of the academic.

WDFs are line managed by a Faculty Assistant Dean with special responsibility for Flexible and Partnership Learning. This is designed to retain the full involvement of faculties in the core academic work of UDC. Their operational work schedules are agreed within UDC structures and regular joint faculty/UDC reviews underpin both the development of the Fellow’s chosen career path and the achievement of UDC’s performance targets.

### UDC: curriculum design to fit business need

Work and professional practice is the starting point for curriculum design for UDC provision that meets the needs of the business. Essentially, this involves learners analysing, critiquing and extending their work-based knowledge and locating it within higher education achievement conventions.

A potentially problematic issue is the focus on skills within employer engagement using a concept of delivery, rather than the development of learning relationships. This does not address the fact that higher education is a transformative process, concerned with analysis, contextualisation, evaluation and critique. University-level learning is not easily commodified, parcelled up and distributed to fill gaps in a deficit model of learning.

The central idea of our work-based programmes is to focus attention on learning

through the actual activities of work (Eraut, 2004). They require learners to engage purposefully with the professional (and social) contexts in which learning takes place (Billett, 2002, 2006) and they support learners in doing this, essentially through skilled and responsive tutorial engagement alongside a range of electronic tools and resources (Bosley and Young, 2006; Young and Stephenson, 2007). A key principle is to enable the high-level learning that occurs in many workplaces to be planned and made explicit so that outcomes can be tested against criteria for certification (Evans, 2004).

The idea is to work with clients in partnership to develop learning opportunities that can generate work-related knowledge in the context of application. Theoretically, UDC's curriculum thinking is broadly located in notions of situated learning and learning as an active social process (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The concept is for professionally situated individuals to explore the familiar contexts of their work environments and to generate meaning, new knowledge and learning through participation in communities of practice. Learning opportunities are not contrived for study purposes but arise from normal work so that the two are complementary, with learning tasks influenced by the nature of work and, in turn, work being influenced by the learning that has occurred.

Our approach enables learners to match professional learning to the requirements of an academic award, representing the same levels of rigour and intellectual challenge as those acquired in more traditional ways. This is achieved through clearly demonstrating that UDC programmes are located within the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). A distinctive feature of UDC is its ability to provide, for companies and organisations, bespoke programmes of professional and workplace development, tailored to organisational objectives and leading to UoD credit and awards, for groups or cohorts of learners. To summarise, our learning solutions meet the needs of learners, contribute to the longer-term development of the organisations involved and are formally accredited as university qualifications.

This recognition that there are many legitimate sites of higher level knowledge production is possibly the most exciting and potentially liberating area of UDC's work and it offers true employer engagement. It is vital that employers and employees recognise that higher level learning and knowledge production can and does occur daily within all areas of the working world. Capturing, further developing and expanding on this naturally occurring activity is where UDC really can add value.

## Conclusion

UDC opened for business on 1 August 2008. We have secured 22 contracts with employers since September 2008 and our first year of operation has been successful in relation to both business performance and the successful enrolment of over 134 full-time equivalent learners in 2008-09 compared with a target of 110.

We are persuaded of the importance, in developing a business-facing institution, of the following:

- the need for the development to be a transparent strategic objective with the active sponsorship of senior management;
- the need for a creative integration of commercial thinking and academic rigour to support organisational development;
- the need for a dedicated team of work-based learning academic specialists in order to build bridges between industry and the wider university, recognising the trans-disciplinary nature of work-based learning and working to enhance the contribution made by faculties without being constrained by overly narrow 'subject' interests;
- as a field of academic practice, work-based development, delivery and the impact it makes is still in its embryonic stage of evolution. There needs to be more applied research and capturing of differentiated case studies. More academics need to be encouraged and supported to specialise in this area of professional practice. HE institutions need to recognise that there is more to do;
- the need for a degree of 'market making' and to educate the market by providing clear narratives of success to which potential clients can relate;
- rather than seeking out cheapness, clients are happy to buy a value-for-money proposition if it gives them what they want in relation to business impact;
- businesses also have their responsibilities to this agenda where they and the university deploy their complementary expertise in developing fit-for-purpose solutions that generate business impact. We recognise that we, in the early stages at least, may still have to take the lead in developing the trust on which such partnerships are founded.

## Recommendations

UDC is still in its early days of implementation. However, a range of issues has emerged during our first year and we are able to make some recommendations for future research and investigation:

- Workforce Development Fellows are a distinctive element of UDC, which we have not seen replicated exactly in other universities. We intend to undertake further research into the roles and career trajectories of WDFs over time. Specific areas for investigation include WDF contributions to work-based learning as a field of academic practice, rather than simply a mode of delivery. We are also interested in researching WDF roles in supporting and developing the capacity and capability of other academic staff in their response to the employer engagement agenda.
- The *raison d'être* for UDC is to provide business impact through employer engagement with university-level study and we need further analysis of this impact, including the development of impact measures with employers.
- A range of questions about the work-based curriculum and its assessment has emerged. For example, what is meant by HE achievement and what is the place of shorter programmes of university-level learning in this field? How can we develop sophisticated assessment methodologies that are rigorous but not onerous, and fit for both academic and professional purposes?
- We also need to respond, through analysis over time, to the question of whether the UDC model offers a sustainable academic and business proposition for the university against the backdrop of a policy drive to shift costs away from the state towards the employer and the individual learner.

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## Engaging academic staff: academic and staff development approaches to embedding employer engagement

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This chapter shares approaches to employer engagement adopted as part of the University of Bradford's employer engagement programme. It outlines academic and staff development approaches to engaging academic staff.

### Background

A number of studies have looked at the ubiquitous question of how to engage academic staff in new or innovative programmes and academic developments (Bluteau and Krummins, 2008; Gordon and Whitchurch, 2009; Henkel, 2000; Trowler, 1998). Various pragmatic and creative approaches have been suggested to motivate and engage staff. The challenges and approaches to academic staff engagement have also been theorised and conceptualised using sociocultural explanations of the relationship between structure and agency of academic staff (Becher and Trowler, 2003), and referring to the symbolic capital/power of specific academic fields (Bourdieu, 1988).

A range of these insights and recommendations seem relevant to the approaches universities might take in endeavouring to engage academic staff in new or innovative ways of working with employers and a number of their applications are discussed in this chapter.

At the University of Bradford, a pre-1992, medium-sized, teaching- and research-orientated HE institution, some academic disciplines have been more enthusiastic and adept at responding to new agendas arising from Government HE policy drives, such as continuing/lifelong learning and health-related Schools. Other academic Schools have traditionally been more responsive to the requirements of external forces, such as their respective professional bodies or industries, and relatively unresponsive to more top-down initiatives. In between there are academic Schools that vary in their responsiveness to change and appear to be at a 'wait and see' stage in relation to the HE employer engagement agenda. These are the Schools where much work has been targeted in order to bring about the greatest overall change in institutional responsiveness to the employer engagement agenda. This has given rise to the question of how to motivate and engage staff in these 'ambivalent' areas.

## Academic challenges

The challenges to embedding employer engagement can be seen to be historical, cultural and traditional – relating to past social paradigms regarding the inherent role of academics and purpose and nature of HE.

First, the *competing priorities* of teaching, research and administration all contend for time and relative cultural value and esteem. Therefore one of the main challenges is to incentivise and allow all academic staff the time and space to develop new approaches and curricula that are responsive to employers.

Secondly, employer engagement may be seen as a threat to tradition in two senses: in engaging new audiences and learners with a corresponding *shift away from traditional learners*; and also, in embracing more vocational content and therefore questioning some traditional perceptions of higher academic study.

Finally, some academic disciplines are historically more abstract in nature making immediate and specific employer relevance less apparent, and perhaps more of a *challenge to core disciplinary values*. Some academic staff are uncomfortable with extrinsic economic influences on disciplines.

The approach to these significant cultural challenges at the University of Bradford has been multi-faceted, including a combined top-down, bottom-up approach of:-

- Staff recognition – Selection and recruitment to a formal ‘champions’ role within every academic School and availability of ongoing development and funding opportunities.
- Staff development – Initial intensive bespoke training for academic champions as well as ongoing institution-wide ‘practice workshops’.
- Interprofessional support – ongoing champions community/forum including a seminar series and integrated team meetings, and a support network for those working most closely with the West Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Network (WYLLN Advisory Group).

### 1. Staff recognition – Champions role, activity plans and development funding

Academic staff were recognised for their employer engagement activities through selection and recruitment to a formal ‘champions’ role within every academic School and the availability of development and funding opportunities. This has gone some way to addressing the problems of competing academic priorities through:

- senior manager endorsement and support to the overall initiative;
- ownership of the changes by Schools and crucially the support of School Deans;
- a devolved approach to cascade the importance and relevance of the employer engagement agenda to Schools;
- selecting staff motivated to become champions through commitment and prior experience of similar work;
- academic staff given recognition of employer engagement work to enable them to give time to such activities.

The idea of the School champions role was developed during initial training (described below) and included: linking with the Escalate Business Development Officer, acting as a change agent within their Schools, delivering their Schools response to employers, auditing existing employer engagement, identifying potential markets and cascading change through staff development

Champions are selected by the relevant Dean on the basis of their interest in and capacity to undertake employer engagement. In return for the agreed amount of funding they are required to submit an annual activity plan to the Escalate Programme Board and commit between half and one day a week to employer engagement activity.

Through the Strategic Development Funding allocated to it, the University of Bradford has also been able to establish a 'development fund' that allows additional resources to be allocated to Schools for employer engagement activity over and above the minimum champion role. The fund allows champions to pursue specific projects that will contribute towards the delivery of specific employer engagement outputs and outcomes, including co-funded student numbers. This funding has absorbed some of this risk and allowed Schools, for example, to invest in building or enhancing employer relationships, to develop new materials or adapt curricula for employee learners, and to trial systems and processes for employer engagement activity. In so doing, they have undertaken activities and explored avenues with employers that would not otherwise have been possible.

This 'recognition' approach represents a top-down approach to supporting and implementing the employer engagement strategy. However, the academic champions role can be seen as providing a 'partnership model' of agreement between central units and the academic Schools. Importantly, the roles, responsibilities, tasks and time of the champions has been negotiated through planning, discussion and activity plans.

The creation of academic champions has provided academic staff with a channel for engaging formally and creatively with the employer engagement agenda and has given them a degree of time and space in which to address employer issues among other diverse and competing priorities. Existing staff expertise could be drawn upon and shared



with the wider team – promoting ‘change from within’ the academic community.

## 2. Staff development – Bespoke training and practice workshops

A programme of staff development was designed with initial, internal, intensive and bespoke training for academic champions, as well as ongoing, externally lead ‘practice workshops’. These have acted to help champions address the challenges arising within their different disciplines and academic areas. The aim of the internal training and externally lead workshops has been to provide staff motivation to act beyond disciplinary boundaries and to embrace interdisciplinary initiatives by illustrating the significant opportunities for staff agency in curriculum change.

The initial champions training covered the Escalate academic framework and quality assurance processes, funding and activity planning, internal and external communication, services marketing and client relationship management. This initial training of the team of academic champions has enabled academic staff to engage in new approval processes, deliver new curricula and identify new potential markets. To achieve this, it has been important that the champions have worked both as part of the Escalate Team as well as being change agents within their Schools.

The practice workshop topics have included accreditation of in-company training, Train to Gain funding, employer expectations, and designing flexible work-based learning programmes. These workshops have developed staff skills and understanding of employer engagement and have enabled staff to become aware of the possibilities that employer engagement offers as an integral part of teaching and knowledge production. The previously ambiguous position of vocational routes through HE is being more widely acknowledged as a genuine and significant role of HE. Through the practice workshops academic staff are being given confidence to respond to the employability and skills agenda – this is important for the committed as well as the less committed.

### 3. Interprofessional support – Champions networks, practice community and seminar series

Interprofessional support has been provided through the development of an ongoing champions practice community, seminar series, and the West Yorkshire Lifelong Network Advisory Group.

The West Yorkshire Lifelong Network Advisory Group was set up to ensure a co-ordinated response to our interaction with WYLLN, to share practice and experience, and identify opportunities for cross-University collaboration in relation to vocational progression. Given the synergies between the work of the LLN and the employer engagement agenda, this group was able to provide significant additional support to a wide group of staff, including those whose main focus was widening participation. It provided a mechanism to enhance understanding of vocational curricula, advice and guidance needs of vocational and work-based learners, admissions processes, and accreditation of prior learning. It also identified and gave rise to projects that crossed the boundaries between both disciplines and Schools/departments such as accreditation of prior experiential learning, progression for apprenticeships, and a number of sector-related leadership and management programmes.

As a community of practice the aim of the champions seminar series has been to facilitate sharing of experiences, approaches and challenges associated with changes such as moving away from provision for traditional learners towards new types of learners. Through the seminars, champions are encouraged to reflect on the processes involved in embedding employer engagement in their Schools, to share common and distinctive experiences and to seek feedback on common challenges. Example case studies each give an illustration of promoting change from within academic disciplines through showing evidence of success and the need for change in practices.

Examples of School issues discussed at the seminars:

- establishing dialogue with employers to ensure the curriculum is responsive;
- developing flexible curricula and frameworks;
- introducing new learning technologies in curriculum delivery;
- lack of employer training accreditation;
- difference within faculties/disciplines in ability to engage with employers.

Examples of institutional issues discussed at the seminars:

- length of validation processes of the institution;
- registry issues in facilitating flexible learning routes, using ‘building blocks’ to degrees and flexible pricing models;
- research into regional workforces and networks.

Examples of staff engagement issues discussed at the seminars:

- academic champions' engagement with their Schools;
- developing staff confidence in employer engagement activities;
- recognising skills within promotion and progression criteria;
- embedding employer engagement activities across the institution;
- aligning an overall, whole-institution offer to employers.

The outcomes from the seminars have become web-based resources for access by staff across the institution. Additionally summary reports of issues arising are discussed at subsequent champions meetings.

The seminars have developed a sense of a learning community in a range of ways: by giving insight into Escalate projects across the Schools, sharing experiences and approaches, demonstrating and developing good practice, supporting self-evaluations, gathering feedback and developing evaluation capacity. Of key importance is that they are lead by two School champions, with contributions that draw out issues and lessons for educational development, institutional learning and embedding employer engagement. Through such a bottom-up approach to increase involvement and proactivity, staff can understand practices in other Schools. The fora have enabled staff to become more comfortable with introducing new extrinsic influences and values that their disciplines may have traditionally resisted. Tensions can be identified and previous 'peripheral' activities be brought into the mainstream.

## Conclusion

The combined top-down and bottom-up approaches taken by the University of Bradford to facilitate change have successfully increased awareness and practice in employer engagement. Embedding employer engagement is a developmental process and is likely to take time to turn ideas and dialogue into practice. However, the approaches above have affected cultural change in the way the whole institution responds to employers. To be delivered effectively cultural change requires a detailed understanding of university processes and academic infrastructure, as well as employers' requirements. Curriculum and academic development approaches are critical to encouraging and supporting academic staff in embracing such change.

At Bradford the challenges have produced opportunities for many staff to develop their pedagogic practices, revise existing curricular, and engage in thinking creatively about their disciplines and students. The paradigm shift in academic practice that the

University of Bradford seeks is being made possible through recognition of the fluidity of the academic role and the possibilities and benefits of multiple staff motivators, illustrated above. Through the Escalate programme, the University has clearly communicated to all academic staff its commitment to integrating employer-led provision within the main responsibilities of the University. Promoting and supporting the engagement and creativity of academic staff is central to achieving engagement of the necessary critical mass of individuals.

### *Future approaches*

Further educational and staff development opportunities are being discussed, in particular through a new academic development unit that incorporates Employer Engagement as well as Teaching Quality, Learner Development, the Graduate School and Student Experience. Through such fora, academic staff will be incentivised to become engaged through cross-University dissemination of practice, internal professional development opportunities, as well as opportunities to reflect on practice within their Schools and departments.

Further evidence though is required to understand how academic staff are engaged and this can only be achieved through University-wide, systematic and in-depth auditing of engagement across the institution. Through such evidence the institution can understand activities that are meaningful to academic identities and how and why staff become effectively engaged in new activities. The gathering and sharing of evidence of success and opportunities, and ways of achieving such success, are essential to engaging staff.

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## Building a cross-disciplinary team – experiences from a work-based learning CETL

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### Introduction

This chapter explores how the Centre for Excellence in Work Based Learning (CEWBL) at Middlesex University worked within subject disciplines to extend negotiated work-based learning across the University. It discusses how the CEWBL developed an interdisciplinary team of 'WBL co-ordinators'. It also reviews the experiences and lessons learned by the co-ordinators as they sought to integrate WBL within their own very varied subject areas. The chapter focuses on practical achievements and challenges, rather than on problematising WBL itself, its necessity, desirability or its methods.

Middlesex University has a distinctive approach to work-based learning (WBL). It is based on the development of a partnership between employers or communities of professional practice, part-time learners who are in work, and the University. Programmes of study are negotiated between these three partners. They are characterised by both formal and informal learning (Boud and Solomon, 2001), learning agreements that enable learners to complete work-based projects, reflection on work practice, and opportunities for the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). The underlying premise is that this negotiated curriculum emerges from work itself, with WBL considered as a subject or 'field of study' rather than simply a mode of study (Costley, 2000). This approach stands in contrast to other approaches in which work-based learning is undertaken in vocational courses or work placements and where the learner is a full-time student gaining work experience that contributes to general employability or vocational attributes.

The primary location for Middlesex University's WBL is the Institute of Work Based Learning. The Institute is a central resource, set apart from the Schools of the University, to implement the University corporate plan objectives for meeting the Government's employer engagement agenda. In 2005, it received Centre for Excellence funding from HEFCE. One of the CEWBL's tasks was to build on the relatively small existing up-take of WBL by other Schools in a more concentrated way. A 'hub and spokes' strategy emerged to fulfil this brief. The CEWBL acted as a hub of support to a specially appointed representative from each School who promoted and co-ordinated WBL within

their School. This small team of WBL co-ordinators had internal knowledge of disciplinary perspectives and School staff, and it was envisaged that they would be well placed to liaise with their colleagues and enable change from within.

The successes and challenges of this strategy for extending WBL across the University are discussed in the rest of this chapter.

### Support from the 'hub': what worked in the development of an interdisciplinary team to extend WBL

All the WBL co-ordinators were clear that the CEWBL 'hub' offered various forms of valuable support. Hub meetings of the co-ordinators and the three members of the CEWBL team were held regularly to share information and ideas, discuss options and modus operandi. Over time, the ways of working together moved from businesslike to camaraderie, where achievements were celebrated and frustrations vented. It became a creative listening space, with a strong team spirit, where ideas that were beyond the initial remit were exchanged and constructively argued over. It provided inspiration and stimulation for the co-ordinators. It helped them acquire the confidence to push at boundaries both pedagogical and administrative, to take risks and return to their Schools re-energised and with ideas to take forward.

The development of what all members considered was an effective multidisciplinary team was underpinned by certain shared values. It was these that enabled the co-ordinators and the CEWBL to engage openly together in ongoing debate as to how WBL could work in the context of the different Schools. All shared:

- a personal experience of and/or strong belief in the opportunities work-based learning offered an academic institution;
- freedom to express their opinions in the hub meetings without feeling they were 'betraying' disciplines or departments;
- a readiness to take risks and to experiment with new designs;
- a readiness to listen to and learn from the experiences of each other;
- a commitment to creating some kind of vision of what WBL could look like in the future.

Support was also offered by the Director of the CEWBL, who attended key School meetings, where appropriate, and provided staff development and advice on managing WBL processes within the Schools. This made it easier for the co-ordinators to introduce influential individuals in their Schools to the CEWBL and enhance the building of networks. As Land (2001) notes, change can be more effective if approached with both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' tactics.

Another way the CEWBL was able to facilitate the work of the co-ordinators was through offering funding for WBL development projects within the Schools. This raised the profile of WBL in the Schools, enabled the CEWBL to engage with individual project leaders and facilitated the development of discipline-appropriate models of WBL.

Finally, the CEWBL offered support by making good practice more widely available. For example, an innovative approach to teaching WBL was developed in one School and the CEWBL was able to fund two evaluations of successive outcomes. These findings then fed back into the Institute of Work Based Learning's own WBL programmes, thus affirming the WBL approach taken within the School.

In summary, the main lesson learned was that support from the central hub of the CEWBL led to the building of a confident interdisciplinary team of WBL co-ordinators and, through them, to enhanced communication between the CEWBL and the Schools.

### The 'spokes': lessons learned through extending WBL into a range of disciplines

The University Schools represent a wide variety of disciplines. For example, the School of Arts and Education includes Art, Drama, Performing Arts, and Music as well as teacher preparation at primary and secondary levels. The School of Health and Social Sciences covers Nursing, Social Work, Criminology, Psychology, natural and environmental sciences, and the Business School includes Law and Economics as well as Marketing and Human Resource Management. These disciplines conform to different principles and norms, acknowledge different definitions of WBL and incorporate a wide range of perspectives regarding learning from work activities.

The challenge for each WBL co-ordinator was to innovate, promote change and, in some cases, build bridges across the political and pedagogical chasms that can divide these academic disciplines. It is no surprise that they met with varied degrees of success. To give a flavour of the work they did, three of the co-ordinators recount their experiences below.

## Extending WBL within the School of Health and Social Science

*My approach was to build on existing contacts across this vast and complex School, using them as agents through which I could sell the WBL product in a range of disciplinary contexts. I found that in situations where academic staff could see the benefits of WBL there were some good outcomes. For example, when staff themselves had a professional background in the area of practice concerned, as opposed to a purely academic background, they needed no convincing that learning derived from work was relevant to university-level learning.*

*A case study is useful here to demonstrate my approach and issues that arose from it. A major public sector employer was keen to exploit the work-based learning of their practitioners. They had already collaborated with Middlesex University in the establishment of a Masters degree programme. Now, they joined forces with academic staff from two departments (Criminology and the Institute of Work Based Learning) to develop a new module for the programme which encouraged practitioners to explore and make explicit their learning from work. My role as the WBL co-ordinator was a liaison one: to convince Criminology colleagues that we could come up with a module that stayed true to the philosophy and knowledge base of the discipline; and to convince the employer that this module was a good way of showing their staff that their experience and knowledge was valued.*

*The main issue that arose from this approach (and it is applicable to other academic programmes in which WBL plays a part), was that once WBL became part of the Masters degree programme, School colleagues tended to believe it required continuing input from Institute of Work Based Learning specialists. In fact, discipline specialists (in Criminology, in this case) can be trained to facilitate and assess WBL as an integral part of their own academic and practice activity, thereby encouraging the development of a community of practice which bridges the academic–practice divide. This raises an interesting question about the ways in which WBL can interface with other disciplines while retaining both its pedagogic identity and its power to bring collaborative experiential learning to life.*

*The main lesson I learned about incorporating WBL into an academic programme was that it can be successfully done when a collaborative interdisciplinary spirit has been created and where there is respect for the expertise and contribution of all the stakeholders. Under these conditions, the essential professional priorities of the employer can be addressed, while retaining both the specific academic subject focus and the richness and depth of work-based learning in a complex and demanding field of practice.*



This account illustrates how cultural adaptation to WBL could be enabled. It shows that the starting point was where academics' understanding began and that the task was to build upon that, stretching it and extending it through dialogue and exemplars to encourage engagement with more of the WBL approaches and philosophies. The next account illustrates this further.

### Extending WBL within the Business School

*When I first took on my role as WBL co-ordinator, I saw it as being about persuading departmental colleagues in my School of the benefits of WBL. The way to do that, I thought, was to get the support of the School's senior management to engage separately with the Heads of Departments of each of the disciplines, and to discuss with each of them how WBL could be used within their existing programmes. Would that it were so easy. It wasn't so much that there was outright opposition, really, as an inability to see just how WBL would work within each subject area.*

*However, a case study shows how a different approach to introducing WBL led to success. Thanks to the positive experience that the CEO of a company had in undertaking a Middlesex University WBL doctorate, he invited one of his client companies to talk with the Business School and design a tailor-made programme leading to an MSc in Business Change based on work-based learning principles. Senior managers in the Business School were engaged in the design and together with the client created a programme that led to high level employees successfully achieving a WBL qualification.*

*I learned three useful lessons about extending the use of WBL in the Business School, which also have wider relevance. Firstly, if starting afresh, I would aim for collaborative working across the School to develop a new programme of study, rather than trying to add WBL to existing programmes. I would aim to engage all departmental Heads together in the development of a programme which had a client company's needs at the heart of it. This would require the Heads to step outside their respective disciplines and focus, not on the content underpinning their own disciplines, but on practical ways in which professional people can use their work-based experience to articulate questions and issues which can be explored in the context of an HRM, Marketing etc disciplinary framework.*

*A second lesson was that I recognised that this kind of collaborative working would be most effective if it was a forum for joint investigation rather than advocacy. Looking back at my approach, I see how my missionary zeal for WBL could well have been negatively received by colleagues who weren't yet able to visualise what WBL was or how it might work. Added to this they had fears of somehow losing control of their programmes. The answer (as in my case study cited above) would be to build examples of good practice and use them to showcase what opportunities WBL could create. This approach would reveal that WBL wasn't an either/or choice. It would reveal that there was no contradiction in individuals both engaging in a WBL programme and needing input from appropriate discipline-led taught modules.*

*The final lesson was that the quality of support that the WBL co-ordinators received from the 'hub' meetings with the CEWBL allowed a successful interdisciplinary team to develop, where the diversity of opinions that inevitably reside in a University such as ours are recognised. In future, staff from the Schools could be invited to participate in a co-operative micro-culture such as this and debate issues and concerns openly in the way that we, as WBL co-ordinators, were able to.*

This account illustrates how the 'hub' offered a place of security from which to develop ideas and approaches, but also where exploration and risk could be rehearsed before being exposed to the main critical audience in the Schools.

### **Extending WBL within the School of Arts and Education**

*As a craftsman-turned-academic I have always seen myself as bridging between camps and carrying the conventions of those different contexts. I have argued elsewhere that the likelihood of embedding new developments partly rests on the nature of the discipline (Durrant, 2009). So, my approach to developing WBL in my School started with thinking about my orientation to each disciplinary area. I asked myself a set of questions: What is the nature of this discipline? What values are inherent in it? What forms and level of scholarship exist in which arguments can be embedded? What conceptions of WBL (or other developmental objective) already exist? From this humble start I then found it best to gather support from within each disciplinary area from two sources: individual academic staff members and management.*

*My approach with academics was to seek to engage in conversations, sometimes over a long period of time, about the potential and relevance of WBL to their area. I made*

*judgments as to the desirability of WBL to a subject area – and chose to leave some disciplinary areas well alone, where I saw that development was not appropriate. However, I found that certain individuals associated with the ideas I was promoting and slowly, over time, a new grouping emerged. The outcome was a group of some 35 academics who have used or experienced WBL in their discipline areas and who, to a greater or lesser extent, endorse and spread the message of the value of WBL. Sometimes these staff members are up and coming and see the possibility of self-advancement. Equally, some well-established staff see the practical opportunities or the intellectual stimulation and challenge offered by WBL. The current position in my School is that we have a group of staff directly associated with WBL, either contributing to our cross-School generic WBL programmes as subject specialists, or using WBL within their own discipline-based programmes.*

*My approach with senior management in the School involved a different, but equally slow and deliberate, strategy. I drew on the insight afforded by an agency perspective on educational development (Land, 2004). We are all aware of the pressures felt by academic, resources and research managers within university faculties and Schools. They are burdened by multiple directives and targets and often work with very little room to manoeuvre. I used an agency perspective to tune in to the pressures felt by individual managers and to decide how to address these pressures. For example, I tried to signal to managers the achievements and success of staff and students in relation to WBL, to remain within my own budgetary restrictions, to understand institutional targets and provide evidence of achieving them.*

*The results of my approach in building support among academics and management has been a growth in numbers of WBL students across the School, with 400 registered in 2009. Over 30 staff are involved with or have used WBL in their programmes. We have a range of WBL routes and programmes and have established a WBL unit in the School with staff from a range of disciplinary areas working as an inter-School team.*

*Two key lessons can be drawn from my approach. One is that my support-building strategy was successful but took considerable time. In total, it has taken seven years of work to realise. The other is that knowing how your work can contribute to the range of School targets is invaluable. Having evidence to hand for instant deployment helps School managers address the demands coming from the centre of the University.*

This account summarises the ‘top-down’ versus ‘bottom-up’ approach that Land (2001) identifies, and also indicates the length of time that may be required in order to capture hearts and minds when infiltrating new ideas into practice.

## Conclusion

In order to encourage the adoption of WBL across the Schools of Middlesex University, the CEWBL discovered that a combination of strategies and interventions was required, including personal networks, professional communities of practice within subject disciplines, and being able to make rapid responses to employer programme development needs. The CEWBL’s ability to offer the practical benefit of small funds to realise academic innovators’ dreams also sweetened progress at times. However, perhaps the main lesson learned was that building teams and spreading change across a university requires persistence and long-term investment of funds and expertise. The WBL co-ordinators, through the support of the CEWBL, were able to make a significant contribution to this.

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## Maximising employer-responsive progression through organisational development

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### Introduction and context

In this chapter I will provide a brief overview of Middlesex University's approach to the accreditation of 'in-house' organisational training and will describe how this, together with the University Work Based Learning Framework and organisational development consultancy services, have provided an effective model for developing employer-responsive provision. I will also describe how this approach has provided a means of establishing 'in-kind' employer contributions that lower the cost of delivery of higher education in the context of the HEFCE co-funding initiative. I will primarily be focusing on a case study example of collaborative organisational development between Middlesex University and Halifax Community Bank (part of the Lloyds Banking Group).

Middlesex University has a long tradition of developing approaches to accrediting work-based learning, working with a wide variety of organisations to accredit their in-house courses and training programmes (see, Garnett et al., 2009; Garnett, 2009). In addition, the University has been delivering work-based higher education programmes since 1993 and has significantly contributed to the development of work-based learning as a field of study. This has been manifested in the work of the University's National Centre for Work Based Learning Partnerships and the Centre of Excellence for Work Based Learning. Building on this experience and expertise, the University introduced the Institute for Work Based Learning in 2007, with a pan-University remit to manage the University's validated Work Based Learning Framework and Accreditation Services, as well as delivering and developing a range of work-based learning programmes.

This work has been further enhanced by the introduction of the Middlesex Organisational Development Network (MODNet) in 2009. This HEFCE-funded employer engagement project is designed to further promote innovation in approaches to work-based learning to focus on meeting the organisational development needs of employers. The MODNet project has also established a provider network of further education

colleges and private training providers, in partnership with the University, to enable a comprehensive response to organisational development needs. The network provides the means to deliver provision from entry to doctoral levels (Levels 1 to 8) and in a variety of forms and sizes that are appropriate to the needs of organisations and beyond traditional higher education curriculum structures. It also provides a wider range of experience and expertise in engaging with employers and other organisations to promote organisational development. This means that the network is better placed to access a broader range of organisational development markets than might be the case for a higher education institution operating alone.

As indicated above, the Institute for Work Based Learning also has responsibility for managing Middlesex University Accreditation Services. This provides a quality assured and consistent approach to the award of higher education credit, including that awarded as a consequence of the successful completion of accredited external in-house courses and training programmes. The availability of both the Work Based Learning Framework and Accreditation Services provide highly flexible mechanisms with which to respond to the needs of employers and other organisations. Both are predicated on the explicit recognition that the workplace constitutes an equivalent site of higher level learning; furthermore, that the knowledge, skills and abilities that occur within the workplace should be accredited to enhance opportunities for those in work (paid or unpaid) to progress to recognised higher education qualifications.

### Overview of Middlesex University Accreditation Services and Work Based Learning Framework

The Middlesex University approach to the accreditation of in-house courses and training programmes includes the provision of initial consultation and advice with organisations to support the development of an accreditation proposal. All proposals include statements that describe the specific context of the course/training programme in question and a rationale for its accreditation. Proposals specify the volume and level of credit that it is being proposed, as well as the related notional study hours it requires. Accreditation proposals also specify the learning outcomes that the course/training programme is designed to enable learners to demonstrate. Each proposal is individually assessed and evaluated in relation to its appropriateness and merit and a recommendation report is considered along with the proposal at a formal University Accreditation Board. The Accreditation Board includes appropriate external examiner scrutiny of proposals and has the authority to approve (with or without conditions and/or recommendations), refer or reject proposals. Approved accredited courses/training programmes are subject to annual progress review and reaccreditation normally after six years.

Once an accreditation proposal has been approved, the University produces a Memorandum of Co-operation for both parties to sign, confirming the terms of the accreditation. Once this is signed, the University allocates an Accreditation Link Tutor to support the appropriate implementation and development of the accredited course/training programme. The Accreditation Link Tutor also has a quality-monitoring role in liaison with the delivering organisation, which is reported on at the Accreditation Board on an annual basis. The University assures the maintenance of the academic standard of the award of all credit in its name and the scrutiny of samples of work for all pass lists that are brought to the Accreditation Board for approval. This process also includes the appropriate scrutiny of samples of work by external examiners. Learners who are consequently recognised as having successfully completed accredited courses/training programmes are awarded corresponding Certificates of Credit. In most cases Certificates of Credit are for 'general credit', unless 'specific credit' has been approved at the accreditation proposal stage. General credit provides learners with higher education credit that can be used toward the achievement of recognised higher education awards but does not guarantee exemption or 'advanced standing' in relation to specifically identified higher education courses.

The University's Work Based Learning Framework provides the facility to construct higher level programmes in collaboration with employers and other organisations that lead to the full range of awards offered by the University. This ranges from Level 4 University Certificates to full Masters programmes, with progression to professional doctorates at Level 8. The framework includes work-based learning modules that are specifically designed to enable learners to reflect on prior learning, plan programmes of learning and develop and deploy appropriate methods of professional inquiry. Crucially, the framework also contains a range of work-based learning project modules that are specifically designed to include fully negotiated content and operate as 'shell' modules. These are available in a variety of sizes in relation to credit volume at all higher education levels and require that the outcomes of project work undertaken demonstrate some form of positive impact upon the specific context of work practice that they are designed to address.

#### Halifax Community Bank case study example

Halifax Community Bank engages primarily in the provision of personal financial services and products. The company offers personal banking, savings accounts, mortgages, insurance and investment products. It is a private subsidiary of Lloyds Banking Group, which is one of the United Kingdom's largest mortgage and savings providers, as well as a

major player in the provision of new accounts and credit cards. Halifax Community Bank has a stated goal “to become Britain’s Most Recommended Bank, through making more of its customers better off” (Halifax Community Bank, 2009). To achieve this goal, the Bank identified the need for higher level training for 600 Branch Managers, 300 Local Directors and 32 in-company Training Managers. This major investment in workforce development was designed to raise the standards of retail banking practice across this national company. The title of the Halifax Community Bank workforce development scheme is ‘Journey in Practice’.

The University worked with Consalia, who are a private training and consultancy partner of MODNet, to submit a tender for a contract to support the development of the Halifax Community Bank Journey in Practice scheme and to accredit the resulting in-company training programmes. KPMG facilitated the tendering process and Consalia were successful in securing the consultancy contract to support the development of a Middlesex University accreditation proposal with Halifax Community Bank. The role of Consalia as a private provider was an essential component in brokering the relationship between Halifax Community Bank and the University. In essence, Consalia provided consultancy services to Halifax Community Bank to help align their strategic organisational development aims and objectives with the University products and services available to meet their needs. This required close working between Consalia and the University to ensure that the flexible potential provided by both Accreditation Services and the Work Based Learning Framework were appropriately and consistently communicated during the early stages of engagement with Halifax Community Bank.

The organisational development consultancy stage proved to be an essential component in maximising the outcomes for all parties and the University would not have engaged with Halifax Community Bank to the degree it has without the contribution of Consalia as a MODNet strategic partner. Once organisational development needs had been further clarified through the initial consultancy stage, the Middlesex University Accreditation Services team also had significant input to support the process of developing a viable accreditation proposal. The proposal development stage also included the identification of the appropriate higher education levels and volumes of learning activity, the identification of appropriate learning outcomes and assessment schemes. This resulted in the production of a ‘Halifax Community Bank Journey in Practice’ proposal to accredit two levels of in-company training programme. For Branch Managers the training programme was proposed as attracting 30 credits at Level 6 and for Local Directors and Training Managers the programme would attract 40 credits at Level 7. This proposal was subsequently submitted to the University’s Accreditation Board for consideration.



The University's Accreditation Board approved the 'Journey in Practice' accreditation proposal, with conditions, and the conditions were subsequently met. The University Accreditation Services team also provided direct training input for Halifax Community Bank Training Managers and other training professionals in preparation for the delivery of the Journey in Practice programmes, which included providing bespoke workshops focusing on aspects of teaching, learning and assessment. The University also assigned an Accreditation Link Tutor to support the implementation of the programmes, to monitor progress and to report on quality and standards when the programmes were in operation.

In addition to the initial positive engagement through accreditation, Halifax Community Bank continued development discussions with the University with a view to providing further career progression opportunities for a significant proportion of the staff that took part in the in-company scheme. The University's Work Based Learning Framework provided the means to build on and recognise the learning achieved through the accredited in-company training programmes. In particular, the availability of work-based learning project modules, with negotiated content at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, provided the means with which to develop curriculum approaches that were responsive to their workforce development needs and led to recognised University awards. The University Accreditation Link Tutor worked with the Bank and the University's Institute for Work Based Learning curriculum development team to construct appropriate employer-responsive programmes. The specific programmes constructed are designed to lead to the award of a University Advanced Diploma in Retail Banking Practice (60 credits at Level 6) for Branch Managers and a Postgraduate Certificate in Retail Banking Practice (60 credits at Level 7) for Local Directors and Training Managers.

These programmes are open to any qualified learner, but the University has worked in collaboration with Halifax Community Bank to provide a specific means for its staff to progress to recognised University awards. The Halifax Community Bank Managers who successfully complete the University-accredited Journey in Practice training schemes are awarded Certificates of Credit that can lead to recognised higher education qualifications. However, the learning that has been demonstrated in relation to these accredited training programmes is also recognised by the University through the production and submission of a portfolio that contributes to the achievement of specific work-based learning project module learning outcomes within the University's validated Work Based Learning Framework. The negotiated content of work-based learning

project modules has enabled Halifax Community Bank to ensure that the projects that its staff undertake are aligned with the Bank's workforce development needs. The flexibility of the University's Work Based Learning Framework has enabled both the recognition of the in-company programmes as constituent parts of these awards and their combination with work-based learning projects that are specifically designed to develop the skills of employees providing business benefits to the employer. These benefits have been explicitly identified by the Bank's Head of Operational Training:

*Work Based Learning has been a new departure from the more traditional qualification route for the Bank but through the partnership with Middlesex we have been able to provide our Branch and Local Directors with a meaningful alternative approach to recognise their performance and contribution to the business. (Halifax Community Bank, 2010)*

### The HEFCE co-funding initiative and a model of employer 'in-kind' contribution

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) outlined its approach to providing growth opportunities for higher education institutions to develop sustainable employer-led provision on the basis of co-funding by employers in the circular letter Allocation of additional student numbers in 2008-09 for employer engagement (HEFCE, 2007a):

*...it is important that employers contribute to the costs of provision, as they benefit directly from the increased skills of their employees ...Long-term culture change is required to encourage employers to invest in HE provision initially and to maintain their investment. (HEFCE, 2007a, p. 1)*

Co-funded provision is explicitly premised on the idea that employers should contribute to the costs of delivery where it is of benefit to the achievement of their business objectives and the increasing skills of their employees. In order that higher education institutions are able to remain financially viable, co-funding arrangements require that employers contribute to meeting the full costs of the delivery of higher education, and it is clearly HEFCE's intention that this is provided in cash. Furthermore, while employer contributions have been phased in, it is their clear intention that 50% becomes the minimum contribution. However, HEFCE have indicated that during the pilot phase, i.e. during the period where higher education institutions are delivering approved employer engagement projects (such as MODNet), they are willing to recognise employer contributions that are 'in kind':

*We are interested in developing a sector-wide approach to in-kind contributions and would welcome proposals from institutions which seek to test this type of co-funding from employers – specifically, how the value of in-kind contributions should be assessed. During this pilot phase, we are willing to allocate co-funded ASNs where employers may be making in-kind contributions that enable providers to lower their costs of delivery.*  
(HEFCE, 2007b, question 4)

Where an employer is providing a resource (human and/or physical) that would otherwise have been paid for and provided by a higher education institution delivering a course of study, then this can potentially be counted as an in-kind contribution. However, a key determinant of eligibility would be demonstrable evidence that the provision of such a resource by an employer lowered the cost of delivery.

In the case of Halifax Community Bank their managers are progressing to 60-credit awards at Levels 6 (Advanced Diploma) and 7 (Postgraduate Certificate). As the accredited in-company training programmes (Journey in Practice), which contribute to the achievement of these awards, are delivered and resourced by the Bank, it is clear that they, as the employer, are contributing in kind in a way that demonstrably lowers the cost of delivery. Here the proportion of the cost of delivery that is lowered is measured in relation to the volume of credit of in-company courses that are delivered by the employer. For example, the 30-credit, Level 6 accredited Journey in Practice course constitutes 50% of the 60-credit Advanced Diploma programme. There are of course costs associated with quality monitoring, the ongoing maintenance of academic standards and administration. However, this model does represent a simple and readily understandable means of measuring in-kind employer contributions where organisations are able and willing to collaborate in the delivery of higher level work-based learning. This approach is only made possible as a consequence of the facility to accredit in-company courses and the flexibility of the University's Work Based Learning Framework to construct programmes that meet employers' needs.

## Conclusions

The collaborative arrangements that support this example of employer engagement have been formalised through the signing of a contract between Halifax Community Bank and Middlesex University. The contract specifies the scope of responsibilities of each partner as well as the identified deliverables, time frames, and legal terms and conditions.

This is consistent with the *QAA Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 2: collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning*:

*There should be a written and legally binding agreement or contract setting out the rights and obligations of the parties and signed by the authorised representatives of the awarding institution and the partner organisation or agent. (QAA, 2004, precept A10, p. 13)*

In this context, the University is operating in a 'supplier' relationship to the Bank, albeit one that is predicated on partnership and mutual interest, which could be seen to compromise the academic autonomy of the higher education institution. For this kind of example the traditional conception of 'admissions', where admissions decisions are the sole remit of the higher education institution, does not seem to fully or appropriately describe the nature of the collaboration. While higher education institutions have a clear responsibility to ensure that learners have the potential to benefit from the programmes they engage with, decisions concerning which staff are supported in doing so seem likely to be primarily determined by the employer. A recent QAA survey of higher education institutions undertaking employer-responsive provision has noted:

*...the importance of a mutual understanding between the employer and the institution in the matter of admissions, especially in relation to the need for the institution's criteria to be followed, so that those selected for the learning have the potential to achieve the intended learning outcomes. (QAA, 2010, p. 20)*

Mutual understanding between an employer and a higher education institution on the matter of ascertaining an individual's potential to benefit from a higher level programme does indeed seem to be a required component of this kind of collaboration. There are, however, questions to be asked about the appropriateness of the traditional concept of admissions in the context of work-based learning. Where decisions concerning employees' potential to benefit from accredited in-company programmes are appropriately within the remit of the employer, or other organisation, it makes little sense for a higher education institution to attempt to impose potentially inappropriate admissions criteria. This is not a compromise on academic standards, as the power to award credit is maintained by the higher education institution. Rather, it is an appropriate and quality-monitored delegation of decisions about who can and who cannot engage with higher level work-based learning, based on criteria negotiated by both the employer and the higher education institution.

The constructive and sustainable nature of the relationship between Halifax Community Bank and Middlesex University has been facilitated by the explicit recognition of the knowledge, skills and expertise that exist and are developed in the workplace. As such, the University does not have to position itself as having a monopoly on knowledge creation and development but recognises that knowledge creation can (and perhaps should) include multiple sites. This is consistent with conceptions of work-based learning associated with what has been called 'mode 2 knowledge' (see, for example, Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons, 2003). Mode 2 knowledge has been described as being concerned with the contextualised application of problem-focused knowledge that recognises a diversity of knowledge production sites (such as the workplace) and involves a reflexive approach to 'actors' and 'subjects' where the status and value of knowledge is negotiated by 'producers', 'collaborators', 'disseminators', 'users' and others. In this context, the traditional role of higher education institutions 'admitting' students to programmes is appropriately problematised by the shift to the negotiated 'recognition' of work-based learning (see Bravenboer, 2010). This shift constructively challenges traditional or preconceived ideas about the kinds of products and services that are available to employers and other organisations through engagement with the higher education sector. It also creates a space within which employers, other organisations and the university can identify shared interests on the basis of mutual respect and understanding. While the university continues to fully undertake its role of maintaining and assuring the academic standards of any higher education credit or award that it confers (see QAA, 2010, p. 11), this is in the context of being a higher education service provider rather than a 'gatekeeper'.

The Halifax Community Bank case study provides an example of the engagement of an employer with a university that has generated a sense of shared ownership of higher education provision, built on accreditation processes that are transparently demand-led. As such, the combination of the University's Accreditation Services, Work Based Learning Framework and organisational development consultancy also provide the opportunity to realise the rhetoric of flexible and employer-responsive higher education beyond tailored traditional models. This example also presents a model of in-kind co-funding that is capable of being replicated in a wide range of contexts, albeit one that is contingent upon working with larger organisations that are willing and able to deliver significant in-company education and training programmes. The model provides a potential means by which employers can contribute to the 'long-term culture change' required to promote greater investment in higher level learning for their employees. A key driver supporting such a change is the explicit shift in the recognition of the knowledge and skills that exist

within the workplace. This shift also requires a corresponding change of culture within the higher education sector, a self-confident, open stance that acknowledges how universities, employers and other organisations can collaborate as equal partners in the promotion of higher level learning opportunities.

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## Building a cross-boundary team: lessons from the South West Higher Level Skills Pathfinder Project

Deborah Winwood (Universities South West) and Richard Bolden (University of Exeter Business School)

### Introduction

From early 2007 until late 2009 the South West Higher Level Skills Pathfinder Project (SW HLSPP) piloted the delivery of the higher level skills agenda to businesses as part of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) 'employer engagement' initiative<sup>I</sup>. The project aimed to both increase demand from employers for higher level skills provision and support the region's higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) in responding to these demands.

With a primary goal of building the long-term capability and capacity of institutions to engage with employers, the SW HLSPP trialled an approach, informed by the Learning and Skills Council's Train to Gain model<sup>II</sup>, of putting in place 12 HE 'intermediaries' to work with employers in identifying their higher level skills needs and with HE providers in developing and providing responsive provision. This initiative formed the core of the employer engagement strand of the SW HLSPP<sup>III</sup> and was supported by a capacity building fund to support the high-risk activity of developing new demand-led provision for employers by HEIs.

Within this chapter we will reflect on the experiences of developing the intermediary team and supporting their cross-boundary activities within partner institutions in order to highlight key challenges and success criteria for this kind of initiative<sup>IV</sup>.

The higher skills intermediary: a case of the boundary-spanning professional  
There is a growing literature within the HE sector on the emergence of 'boundary-spanning' professionals<sup>V</sup>, who work across traditional organisational and occupational divides. Such individuals are increasingly prevalent in areas such as employer engagement, frequently acting as translators and/or moderators between multiple stakeholder groups, and playing a key role in building and sustaining networks and relationships. Within the SW HLSPP, members of the intermediary group were a clear example of people in such roles as their success was dependent on being able to transcend a number of boundaries both within and outside the institutions in which they were positioned.

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<sup>I</sup> This was one of three regional pathfinder projects funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as part of their strategy to explore and test ways of enhancing employer engagement with higher education (HE) on a regional basis. Within the south-west of England this initiative was managed by Universities South West (formerly HERDA South West). For further details please see <http://www.universitiessouthwest.ac.uk/partners/PastProjects/HigherSkills.aspx> and <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/econsoc/employer/path/>.

<sup>II</sup> See also <http://www.traintogain.gov.uk>.

<sup>III</sup> Additional activities included an accompanying research project on HE employer engagement, the development of a shell accreditation framework and a funding methodology pilot.

<sup>IV</sup> This paper is co-authored by the SW HLSPP project manager and researcher.

<sup>V</sup> See, for example, Whitchurch, C. (2009) Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures (Final Report). London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Available from: <http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research.html>.



Within institutions intermediaries were required to bridge the traditional academic-administrative divide, bring together expertise from across diverse academic schools and disciplines, and engage with a number of levels within their institutions (including professional services, senior management and academic departments). Outside their institution, intermediaries were expected to liaise and consult with employers and employer groups, trade and professional associations (such as Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and trade associations) and other higher skills networks (e.g. Lifelong Learning Networks and Train to Gain). Through their work intermediaries were also often required to put together learning solutions that drew together expertise and capacity from a variety of providers (including HEIs, FECs and private training organisations), and to collaborate with policy and funding bodies (such as the Regional Development Agency (RDA) and Learning and Skills Council) in securing funding and support.

As such, the higher skills intermediaries were operating in a complex and contested environment and, in addition to the performance targets set by the project, could be considered as fundamentally involved in culture change within the HE sector.

### Evolution of the intermediary team throughout the project

Hosted by eight of the partner HEIs in the south-west, the intermediaries formed a diverse team in relation to geographical location, operational management and sector focus. Their remit was to identify and translate demand from employers for university-level skills training, and to work with the relevant institution to develop an appropriate solution. The strategic management of this team and the responsibility for achieving project objectives was the responsibility of the SW HLSPP project manager. Building and maintaining this team became central to the ability of the pathfinder project to achieve its quantitative and qualitative outputs. Thus the team's function became one of business development, with the capacity to focus attention quickly on skills gaps and needs as they emerged, changing direction as necessary to respond to early indicators or growing trends.

In this section we will track the process of developing and supporting the intermediary team throughout the life of the project. It is divided into four subsections, each reflecting a distinct phase of the SW HLSPP:

- a) recruiting and placing intermediaries;
- b) developing employer engagement processes;
- c) embedding collaboration processes;
- d) transferring outcomes.

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<sup>vi</sup> Smith, J., Kettle, J. and Stapleford, J. (2010) Building a Flexible Framework for Health and Social Care: Report of an audit of learning providers and employers to identify provision that meets local workforce development needs on behalf of the West Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Network. Bradford: Escalate, University of Bradford.

<sup>vii</sup> Smith, R. and Duffy, J. 2009, The Calderdale Framework. Available from: <http://www.healthcareworkforce.nhs.uk/ffc/login.php> [last accessed 4th July 2011].

<sup>viii</sup> Skills for Health (year) Nationally Transferable Roles. Available from: <http://www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/rethinking-roles-and-services/proven-role-templates-for-a-skilled-and-flexible/> [last accessed 4th July 2011].

In each phase we will comment on the experiences of both the intermediary group themselves, as well as the SW HLSPP manager and the views of other groups as captured through the accompanying research project.

#### a) Recruiting and placing intermediaries

Given the breadth of higher skills provision, the project's mandate was to focus intermediary activity on three areas deemed to be of particular significance to the region: creative industries, engineering and 'business improvement' (spanning all industry sectors). As the initiative progressed a further area, health, was added and, as will be discussed later, an additional area of 'low carbon' skills became a priority area towards the end of the project.

Intermediaries were recruited in the first instance through public advertisement by those HEIs that were engaged in the project as intermediary hosts. The posts were all newly created fixed-term positions with HEIs across the south-west whose strategic objectives included growth of their business development and enterprise functions. In placing intermediaries, two HEIs chose to physically locate them within a partner FEC – a decision influenced by the advanced nature of business development functions in those colleges as well as their geographical location. This first round of recruitment, from creation and agreement of job descriptions through to intermediaries commencing employment, took between three and six months.

Induction into the role took a further two to three months and, due to the delayed appointment of an overall project manager, was co-ordinated separately by each host HEI. Consequently there were some substantial differences between the experiences of intermediaries at this stage in the project and the degree to which they were briefed to address overall project objectives and/or the specific aims of the host institution. In each case, the newly appointed intermediaries spent time familiarising themselves with their specific HE context and developing relationships with local employer networks, brokerage services, FECs, HEIs, SSCs and employer organisations. Within their host institutions, and those nearby, they also spent time meeting with academics and heads of discipline in order to appreciate the existing range of expertise and provision within their area of focus. The induction process also included a small number of team training days for the SW HLSPP intermediary team as a whole, notably around sales training and interpretation of business leadership needs.

Given the variety of experience outlined above, rather unsurprisingly a number of different understandings of project priorities emerged. In particular there were

differences in the extent to which intermediaries aligned themselves with overall project aims vis-à-vis those of their host institution and the extent to which they regarded themselves as responsible for co-ordinating the development of new HE provision (often in relation to capacity development fund projects) and/or promoting and brokering existing provision to employers. From a project leadership perspective this created some challenges in ensuring a consistent and co-ordinated approach across the region, as well as maintaining a cohesive and motivated team. For the intermediaries themselves there was a lack of clarity over roles and responsibilities, which lead to a number of resignations within the first year. Additional challenges to effective cross-boundary working that became apparent during this period included:

- intermediaries ‘going native’ – aligning themselves to host HEI rather than project priorities;
- intermediaries operating on an individual basis rather than as part of an integrated regional team;
- reluctance (from both sides) for collaboration with other regional brokerage teams;
- a perceived lack of credibility or scepticism from employers;
- resistance and/or lack of commitment within HEIs to addressing identified higher skills needs;
- limited capacity within the intermediary team to address the targets set out for them;
- lack of clarity over project boundaries and core priorities.

While staff turnover among the intermediary team posed a number of difficulties and undoubtedly delayed the achievement of overall project aims, it also offered the opportunity to develop a more rigorous and consistent approach to both the recruitment and support of intermediaries, informed by previous experience. For the project manager, having to integrate new members into the team at the same time as dealing with a fragmented interpretation of project and working processes, revealed the need for a more structured approach to team management. Fifteen months into the project this resulted in a new post, Business Development Officer (BDO), being created. This role was to lead the intermediary team, such that a common understanding of the project priorities was communicated, and to establish the business development process, leaving the overall project manager somewhat freer to focus their attention at a more strategic level.

Shortly after recruitment of the BDO (a former member of the intermediary team herself), a standard induction and training programme was implemented for both the

project priorities and work processes, which enabled new staff to be quickly brought up to speed and integrated with the rest of the team. Attention was also given to realigning the existing team in order to better deliver overall project objectives. A key priority at this stage was team building, and a team away day with structured indoor and outdoor activities made a huge contribution to helping the individuals understand each other's strengths and experience.

## b) Developing employer engagement processes

Successful employer engagement and subsequent successful brokering of the skills demand to HEIs and FECs, such that they would engage with converting employer training demand to curriculum provision, provided a number of challenges. These were both operational and strategic, and posed a number of questions for the BDO and her team, such as:

- How to balance the competing needs and expectations of businesses (of all sizes and sectors) and HE providers?
- How to persuade business leaders about the value of engaging with HE?
- How to influence an HEI/FEC to respond effectively to identified employer higher skills needs?
- How to articulate how higher skills provision addresses recognised business needs?
- How to develop collaborative relationships with other regional and national skills brokerage services?
- How to strategically manage a diverse regional team comprising individuals who were managed on a day-to-day basis by host HEIs?

The relative freedom from imposed management constraints and direction at the start of the project had allowed individuals to experiment with their approach, and while some flourished and were successful, others floundered or became focused on institutional objectives rather than project ones. In part how the individual intermediaries perceived themselves within the role influenced how they went about contacting and approaching employers, and how they endeavoured to source provision within HEIs. Broadly, several approaches were taken to the role, including:

- a straight business development function encompassing a market, source, propose and close cycle on an employer-by-employer basis;

- a response to an existing area of interest for HEI/employer collaboration and a means to tap into the funding available through the SW HLSPP capacity development fund;
- to a lesser extent, a means for capitalising on existing or emerging relationships with professional bodies (such as the South West Design Forum) in order to respond to employer skills gaps already identified by them.

Essential skills, knowledge and attributes (both professional and personal) were required by members of the team, regardless of their approach, including:

- effective communication and credibility with business leaders, other regional brokers and with HEI/FEC managers and academics;
- business development skills, including an understanding of marketing and the sales process;
- analysis of organisational training needs – necessitating a knowledge of business and management, together with an understanding of training and education delivery and outline course specification;
- knowledge of the HE and FE sector.

This combination of skills is unusual in any individual and so a full continuing professional development (CPD) programme was put in place by the project to cater for the varied needs in these areas. This training and support increased the team's ability to influence and negotiate with employers, HEI/FEC staff and external organisations, which in turn facilitated their effectiveness in achieving project outputs.

The project had significant 'hard' performance targets in relation to employers engaged, training needs analysis and learner numbers, while the funds available to support new curriculum development sub-projects were limited, and learner numbers were often predicted to be realised after the end of the project. The team leader, therefore, placed the business development model as a high strategic and operational priority for the whole team. This necessitated a change not just to the working practices of the team, but also to the culture and behaviours. The process used to begin the change was:

- Initiation of quarterly update meetings with each intermediary and their line manager to discuss individual performance and the linkages to that of the whole team. This incorporated forward planning of the next quarter's work, and where necessary rolling forward of output targets with remedial action.
- Quarterly team meetings, where the focus shifted from what had previously been a 'round table' update on what each person was doing, to a 'sales'-orientated format,

with the use of team performance matrices and graphs together with group planning of how to address any shortfalls.

- The introduction of key performance indicator (KPI) charts that compared each of the project target sectors. These were used to stimulate a transfer of best practice through sharing what had worked well in the higher performing areas, and discussion about any barriers hindering progress for those achieving fewer outputs.
- Introduction of standard documentation for recording organisational training needs and outlining an appropriate demand-led training specification. The whole team fed into the design and piloting of this.
- Definition and sharing of marketing plans and provision of sales material.

As the approach of the team to employer engagement and translation of training needs became more co-ordinated, a sharp rise was seen in the number of employers engaged, training needs analyses and employers agreeing in principle to the need for higher level skills training. The team was now hitting and exceeding its targets in these areas, although conversion to actual provision and learner numbers was still very low due to the difficulty in aligning responses from HEIs with confirmed participants.

### c) Embedding collaboration processes

At the two-year point in the project a further significant change to the team took place. The existing project manager left and the BDO was appointed as her replacement. With less than a year of the project remaining, the new project manager was supported by the project's steering and management groups to implement a series of actions to improve the team's capability to convert potential business to actual learner numbers. These included:

- further team-building activities;
- closer collaboration with line managers within host HEIs;
- a new sub-regional approach, capitalising on outputs from the research and funding methodology strands, to realise benefits within the employer engagement team;
- promoting three intermediaries to act as sub-regional leads for their areas rather than relying on a single BDO to co-ordinate activities between all members of the intermediary team;
- production of an HE employer engagement toolkit.

The new sub-regional approach, managed by lead intermediaries, provided the mechanism and drive to collate training needs and to pool demand from employers such

that the development of new provision became viable. This helped address the problem that many of the employer training demands identified by intermediaries were of insufficient magnitude to attract HE providers to respond. In conjunction with this the strand leaders from the research, funding methodology and shell frameworks (parallel SW HLSPP work streams to that of the intermediaries) were brought into closer contact with the intermediary team by inclusion in all team activities and quarterly meetings. This encouraged a sharing of knowledge about the barriers, drivers and other issues relating to how and why HE providers respond to employer demand for higher skills.

It was also identified that, regardless of the intermediaries' own skills, one of the key factors in their success in converting potential delivery to actual delivery was the willingness of the regional HEIs to collaborate and their understanding of why they were being asked to respond. To influence and change this, regular round table meetings of all of the line managers from the host institutions were scheduled. These were used to share project strategy, information and issues. The effect was immediate – the line managers, armed with a greater understanding of the project as a whole and its performance, instantly began problem solving, returning to their institutions to initiate action.

An electronic HE employer engagement toolkit was also produced by the project team for distribution and dissemination to internal and external stakeholders and interested parties across the region. This helped to revive interest in the project in its later stages, opening further doors for the intermediary team to investigate.

#### d) Transferring outcomes

In the latter months of the project, given the impending end of contracts, many of the intermediaries began to leave in order to take up new jobs. Interestingly, many of them were recruited by HEIs to work on similar types of project, but on a local rather than regional basis, thereby confirming the utility of the skills, experience and relationships they had acquired. An enduring challenge with fixed-term initiatives like this is maintaining sustainability and retaining people long enough to complete the project. From the project manager's perspective this created a series of further challenges in supporting the team, including:

- capturing and transferring knowledge and capabilities;
- maintaining the morale of remaining team members;
- maintaining sufficient momentum to continue to achieve project targets;
- supporting individuals seeking out future employment.

Outcomes and ongoing work of the intermediary team was transferred to host institutions as the team naturally disbanded. However, the project was granted a limited operational extension to continue with employer engagement activities for a further seven months, retaining two members of the team. The extension focuses on businesses operating in the low carbon sector and fed into a similar SW RDA funded project 'Low Carbon – High Skills' running through to March 2011. This has capitalised on the skills and knowledge that the two intermediaries and the project manager have built up over a three-year period in operating cross-boundary teams, enabling project outputs to accrue quickly.

### Key themes and learning points

From the account given above a number of key themes and learning points can be identified that we would recommend considering when developing and supporting a cross-boundary intermediary team such as the one described here.

- **Clarity of role and purpose:** much of the early part of this project was focused on offering a sense of clarity to intermediaries about the nature and purpose of their role. Competing demands and expectations from partner institutions further added to this challenge. While some uncertainty is inevitable given the new nature of these roles, maintaining an open dialogue and putting in place clear lines of accountability and support would assist this process.
- **Sense of place and team membership:** on a related point, given the diversity of experiences of intermediaries within their host institution, an explicit attempt to develop a sense of wider team membership and identity (while remaining sensitive to local contexts) is important in ensuring a coherent and integrated approach across the region.
- **Influencing skills and leadership:** given their position at the boundary between HE, employers and other brokerage services, the role of the intermediary was more than simply a sales person or project manager. In effect, they were largely responsible for bringing about culture change within and between organisations, often with very little in the way of formalised power and/or resources. As such the intermediary role can be considered as one of leadership in a partnership environment and their capacity to achieve project outcomes is largely dependent upon the skilfulness with which they enact this function.



- **Continuity and change:** the ability of the team leader and team members to respond rapidly to changing and evolving circumstances while continuing to meet predetermined targets and priorities was a constant balancing act. The current project operated through the most substantial economic recession in recent history, yet had been conceived at a time when such a scenario was not anticipated. Addressing the need for both change and continuity for individuals, teams, organisations and projects is a key consideration for initiatives such as this.
- **Career progression and sustainability:** finally, this project highlights the importance of planning for career development and sustainability of outcomes beyond the end of the current initiative. While the SW HLSPP clearly recognised the professional development needs of team members, greater attention could have been paid to how intermediaries might have been retained until the end of the project and how their host institutions may have planned for ongoing investment in higher skills activities.

## Conclusions

There were many exciting opportunities and challenging issues associated with operating, across a number of boundaries, a team of intermediaries employed to effect a culture change with both HE and employers. There were many more than have been documented, though the key points have been described.

Arguably some of the outputs of this team could have been achieved had the individuals been employed and working solely on behalf of their host institutions. However, collaboration across the region would have been unlikely to have occurred on this scale. Moreover, it would have been difficult to cross some of the employer boundaries (that may be guarded by a mistrust or lack of understanding of universities) without the explicit employment of a team of people charged with this specific task, and it would have been difficult to draw upon the niche expertise found in the region's smaller HEIs/FECs. While not discussed in this paper, relationship building between the project manager and other regional employer-facing teams also significantly supported the team's ability to work collaboratively with a number of regional employer-facing organisations such as Train to Gain, and is, therefore, another area for consideration.

By operating a regional cross-boundary team, it is proposed, the SW HLSPP was able to present an inclusive and united approach that appealed to employers, learners and educational institutions alike. The extent to which the benefits of this boundary-spanning work will continue to be reaped within the region is yet to be seen, but what remains clear is that in order for HE to effectively engage with the higher skills agenda and to address recognised skills needs in business and society there will be an ongoing need for individuals and teams capable of navigating their way between these complex terrains.

## 2. Engaging Learners

The angel in the marble and the devil in the detail:  
flexible learning in work-based educational models

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### Introduction

This chapter examines what the slippery concept of ‘flexible learning’ means in the context of work-based learning (WBL). It then considers some of the concepts and features of this flexible learning in more detail, and then looks at advantages and tensions implicit in flexible WBL.

### Defining WBL

In the context of this chapter we consider learning that is based in the workplace to have two critical features. Firstly, it should enable a participant to use their experience and practice at work as the basis of credit-bearing study; and secondly, the concept of partnership with an employer needs to be central. Typically, what this means is that the employer, the university and the learner negotiate a three-way learning pathway or contract; all three have interests that have to be satisfied:

Participant	Interests
<b>Employer</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— capacity building</li> <li>— completed reports or projects with the knowledge transfer element of academic input</li> </ul>
<b>University</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— needs to be satisfied that the assessment of learning is of appropriate quality</li> <li>— opportunities developed need to be cost-effective for the institution</li> <li>— should represent appropriate business development opportunities</li> </ul>
<b>Learner</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— personal development</li> <li>— career progression</li> <li>— qualification</li> </ul>

#### EXAMPLE 1: tripartite agreements in Nursing at the University of Southampton

Nursing WBL at the University of Southampton is based on this kind of tripartite relationship, and this is seen as crucial to ensuring learning that is both clinically relevant and academically sound. During an induction day, learners are offered advice and support in developing their outcomes, which are valid and binding when agreed by all three signatories (learner, manager and academic adviser).

There are also models where a fourth organisation with a mission to promote workplace learning – such as unionlearn, a Sector Skills Council or fdf – are involved in the agreement of the overall model for a particular work-based learning initiative.

#### EXAMPLE 2: Kingston University and unionlearn

With Kingston University's KUBIS online work-based learning initiative, the TUC and unionlearn have helped to design the offer and publicise it to their members, and individual workplace union learning reps have been part of the discussions with employers and individuals about accessing the course.

## Defining flexible learning

Flexible learning has a variety of possible interpretations (Casey and Wilson, 2005), and is often conflated with blended learning. We consider flexible learning, in a work-based context, to be flexible as to the place and time of delivery, and to have content that can be in whole or part determined by learners and/or employers on their behalf. Figure 1

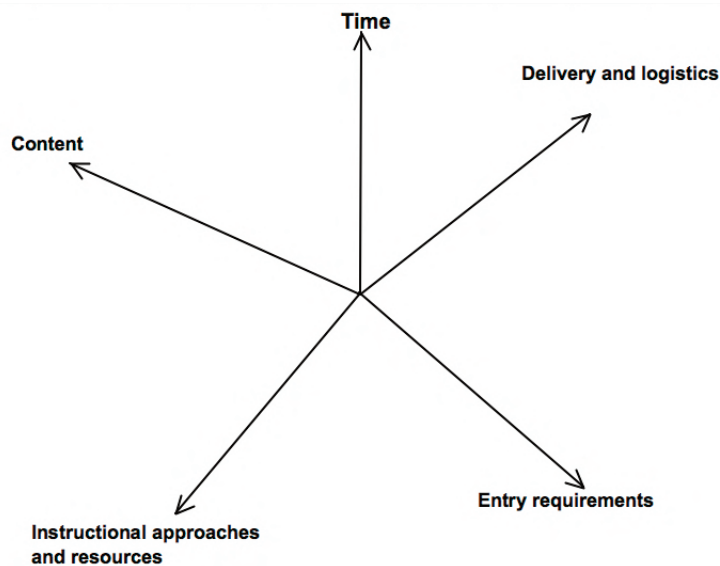


Figure 1: (reproduced from Casey and Wilson, 2005, p. 6)

Learning opportunities may embrace a range of flexibilities at different points in the student journey. A learner may, for example, combine a taught module delivered by lectures and tutorials with self-defined and directed work-based projects. Such flexibility of provision may have the following characteristics:

- learning is based on an appropriate mix of opportunities that learners can choose from to fit their needs;
- a curriculum designed to enable personal and professional contextualisation, with the starting point based in professional practice;
- support for independence in learning;
- provision of opportunities for APEL;
- inclusion of approaches, such as online and distance learning, which are open as to the time and place of study.

Regarding the learner experience, the learner draws together their understanding into a coherent whole, where coherence is defined by the knowledge required for individual and organisational development. Flexibility here means that, in practical terms, learning from the following types of activity could be included:

- work shadowing;
- projects derived from problems, live briefs, policy initiatives;
- working with a mentor or other colleagues in action learning sets;
- attendance at professional events such as conferences or manufacturers' equipment training programmes.

### EXAMPLE 3: De Montfort University: mentoring and action learning

The portfolio of short, accredited WBL courses includes an 'improvement leaders' course designed to equip service users, carers and staff from mental health and learning disabilities communities with skills to achieve measurable service improvement. All participants need a service improvement project agreed with their sponsoring Trust, and supervisory and mentoring systems have been developed to ensure that the learners and the sponsoring organisation gain maximum benefit from the course. Allocation to an action learning set means that delegates have opportunities for learning, reflecting and challenging with peers.

## Concepts and features in flexible WBL

### *Work knowledge*

Work-based curricula differ from traditional curricula in the sense that they are designed from and for work and are based on work, as opposed to disciplinary, knowledge. The concept of work knowledge is generally understood to include knowledge that is produced in the context of the application of theory and/or others' best practice, and knowledge that is constructed in and through work itself (Walsh, 2008). Arguably the concept can extend to a third type of knowledge: the 'blended' knowledge that work-based learners create when they apply theory to practice, and practice to theory, in settings where they need to negotiate the messiness of real-life practices and problems

(Beckett and Hager, 2002). This messy, 'non-textbook' nature of everyday practices may lead them to problematise established theories that posit a rational and ordered reality and means that a WBL experience can give rise to a form of knowledge that is potentially disruptive in the sense that it questions existing theory and theoretical frameworks.

The nature of work knowledge sets up a need for work-based learners to think about their learning process regarding both acquisition of knowledge and participation in the creation of knowledge. They are both applying knowledge to practice and constructing knowledge out of the work situation in which they find themselves. The 'angel in the marble' metaphor used by Trowler (1996) about APEL applies equally well to work knowledge. Michelangelo famously said "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free". The form of knowledge that is inherent within the work practice equates, for the learner, to the 'angel' that Michelangelo was able to release from blocks of marble. His sculptor's tools and techniques were what enabled him to set his angel free; the role of higher education is to provide learners with tool and techniques that can enable them to do the work of visualising and releasing their own angel.

### *Negotiated curriculum*

Work-based curricula are developed as a partnership between stakeholders. The concept of the negotiated curriculum is sufficiently elastic to take in a range of possibilities, including:

<b>Individually negotiated</b>	tailor-made for an individual who seeks professional development and whose needs are not covered by a pre-existing programme.
<b>Cohort negotiated</b>	designed for groups of learners with needs and interests that are broadly similar. Can be based on group learning contracts.
<b>Accredited</b>	employer needs a group (e.g. new staff or staff at particular point in-company in career) to have a development opportunity. They are able to deliver in-house, but want accreditation. Academic partners can identify suitable assessments, advise on sessions and enable credit to be allocated.

### *Emphasis on critical reflection*

An emphasis on critical reflection as a vehicle for learning is a prominent feature of flexible learning in the HE work-based context. Some manifestations of this are:

- learning plans: these are designed to develop learners' ability to reflect upon their own practice, theoretical and policy knowledge base and their own professional/work values;
- opportunities for APEL;
- explicit focus on tools that support the ability to be critically self-reflective e.g. learning circles and other debriefing tools, SWOT analysis and the use of 'rich pictures';
- methods of assessment that employ critical reflection are often used. Evidence might include: artefacts; company reports, professional conference papers and journal articles; presentations to company and other stakeholders; reflections and self-evaluations on what has been learned and at the higher doctoral level evidence of innovation and leadership in practice. The patchwork text approach (Winter, 2003) may be employed as a means for pulling disparate assessment tasks together.

### *Focus on information skills and knowledge management*

The development of skills for locating, evaluating, utilising and sharing appropriately information from a range of sources unites much of the flexible, work-based provision within the higher education sector. In particular, as the contemporary world increasingly relies on the internet for its information requirements, there is a particular need for people to develop critical and analytical skills in order to assess, and appropriately use, information they find on the web (UCL CIBER, 2008). WBL can offer approaches that scaffold learners abilities to do this, within complex and heterogeneous real-life contexts. This enables them to acquire agility in knowledge management and information literacy, important for the workforce and the researcher of the 21st century, and strengthens their ability to solve problems in their field of work.

#### EXAMPLE 4: Kingston University Business Process foundation degree

The work-based Business Process foundation degree at Kingston University uses online taught modules at the beginning of the course, before moving into work-based projects after the first few months. In the taught element, students explicitly practise and learn information literacy skills as part of the curriculum, and they go on to use these extensively in the work-based projects.

#### *Systems of learning support*

One important aspect of learning support is navigational support in the form of active guidance about (and facilitation of) how to access and make best use of the services and sources of information that are on offer to employed learners. Another is the learning and study support that is provided for work-based learners who undertake most or all of their study online. Typically this will involve a variety of methods (e.g. email, discussion boards, instant messaging, Skype, video conferencing, messages on blogs and walls, wiki contributions).

#### EXAMPLE 5: De Montfort University study support unit

Planning for Success (PFS) has been developed as a stand-alone, non-compulsory 'unit' for learners studying within the University Certificate of Professional Development in WBL framework. It acknowledges the challenges faced by work-based learners embarking on higher level study and, in particular, the need to sustain their commitment through to a successful outcome. This reflective resource enables the learner to:

- consider the academic skills required for higher level study;
- build a skills profile and identify their own development priorities;
- develop a plan for action using the universities wide range of support and guidance.



### *Advantages and tensions*

There are many advantages in flexible learning, to the learner and to the employer. Some of these have been touched on earlier in this chapter, and all have been discussed in much of the WBL literature. A detailed account of the advantages of work-based learning is given in an impact study by the Higher Education Academy (2008a, pp. 24-28), which explores the impact of WBL in six institutions.

Tensions within the debate and development of WBL fall broadly into the categories of academic, pedagogic, sustainability and perceptual. Additionally, there are major practical issues that have to be taken into account.

### *Academic issues*

WBL may present challenges to members of the academic community, many of which are born of unfamiliarity, concern over quality or deep-seated differences over the appropriate place of knowledge construction. The last of these is explored by Walsh (2008) when she addresses the changing perception of the university as the exclusive site of knowledge production. Thus, some academic prejudice may be linked to preserving the elite role of the university and thus preserving the established order of the intellectual economy. However, many find this process of change compelling, if the dialogue about WBL and the production of knowledge is explored. Some academic prejudice comes from reasonable concerns about preserving the quality of education. It may be that there is a perception that WBL is of lower quality than traditional learning, or it may be doubts over the possibility of ensuring appropriate learning outcomes and enabling a student experience of suitable quality. Clearly, of course, some problems arise because this is a relatively new area of practice, and requires different skills and infrastructure for delivery.

One important strategic issue is whether the workforce development area can offer academics opportunities for recognition and reward, including research opportunities in WBL.

### *Staff resource issues*

Some of the questions posed by this area relate to the construction of the learning experience, its support and assessment. Different forms of assessment may be required, with greater involvement of the employer as a partner in the development of any learning agreement. There is a need to consider timing of learning opportunities (including meeting with mentors or tutors) and overall timing issues. All of this needs to be considered in academic workload modelling, and because the area is relatively new, the demands can be underestimated by academic managers. The result is that the area is seen as undesirably demanding by academic staff.

### *Sustainability*

Sustainability is an issue for any new HE programme, particularly given current resource pressure. The ideal may be a personalised learning programme that absolutely reflects the professional profile of the individual – and in this context would be a flexible, WBL programme. However, the question then arises, how personalised can it be and still be cost-effective and of a comparable quality of experience to students on other programmes with other delivery methods? Another 2008 study (HEA, 2008b, pp. 17-20) touches upon a range of costing issues and gives an indication of those areas where higher costs (in comparison to traditional programmes) may be expected. These include additional set-up costs, and smaller cohorts may mean relatively high fixed costs per head even though there are savings to be made, such as in estates or campus-based student services.

### *Perceptions of benefit*

Different, and at times competing, perceptions of WBL by champions in HE, other academics, HEIs themselves and the employer community are also significant. Champions of the area operate in a culture that places the learner at the centre, while other academics may consider it to be a work-intensive option, given the tailor-made approach and negotiated pathways.

### Practical issues

As WBL presents different demands and challenges to administrative and regulatory systems, it may require major change and resourcing. There is a balance to be struck between being student centred while keeping the administrative burden in proportion. Admissions and registration procedures that are flexible enough to accommodate students for a module or small unit of study and maintain those records for a period of time to enable credit transfer are essential. However, the structure of the course and its relationship to quality procedures are also key.

#### EXAMPLE 6: University of Southampton: open module

An 'open' WBL module was created, with a broad list of learning outcomes, a selection from which is negotiated (and may be adapted) for the learning contract. This means that the open module goes through the validation process but leaves a considerable degree of flexibility for each student.

There is a major issue with time, regarding what is needed from workplace mentors or supervisors, and the allocation of time for study. There is a further question of 'notional' study time and the measures of levels of learning that relate to the responsibilities and professional standards required at work by relatively low-level workers in contrast to the standards expected from full-time students. A need exists to develop meaningful metrics for all of these as current HE measurements of notional study time do not easily map on to WBL.

### Conclusions

We have been drawn to the idea that the ultimate purpose of WBL is for employed learners to identify and release their 'angels' (or, in more familiar language, to achieve their goals with respect to personal and professional development). We are also persuaded that a model of education based on the concepts and principles of flexible learning offers the ideal means for achieving the conditions that will support this process. On the question of whether it is necessarily the most expedient means at this particular stage in the development of the HE sector we share a measure of doubt. These doubts stem from our recognition of the practical difficulties that are still bedevilling attempts to

introduce flexibility into the frameworks, systems and processes that HEIs operate within. In this chapter we have highlighted issues like academic timetabling and systems of reward, the gearing of university systems and processes to non-standard models of delivery, and the financial risks associated with the development and delivery of courses that depart from traditional programme norms. As WBL becomes a more accepted and embedded part of the mosaic of higher education we anticipate that workable solutions to these problems will spread across the sector. Hand in hand with this development we hope, and expect, to see a narrowing of the implementation gap between the ideals of flexible WBL and the reality of what employed learners experience on the ground.

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## The e-APEL tool: developing informed conversations about prior learning

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### Introduction

Evans (1987, p. 11) asserts that:

*... hidden within all students ... lies a mass of knowledge and skills acquired in a wide variety of ways and distributed between heart, head and hands ... The task of both student and teacher is to bring this mass out into the open, to identify it ... to record it as evidence ... and put it to use.*

The accreditation of prior learning provides a mechanism that can release this “mass of knowledge” into the open. The e-APEL tool discussed here was developed specifically to structure the thinking of learners to assist in the identification, articulation and evidencing of such knowledge, into a format that is recognisable as higher education and therefore able to attract academic credit.

The need for an investigation into the potential for developing ‘e-APEL tools’ arose due to the rapid growth in demand for negotiated work-based learning programmes at university level. A prototype tool (whose source code is freely available for download from Source Forge at <https://sourceforge.net/projects/e-apel/>) had been developed with JISC funding (Minton and Malone, 2009). However, professional discussions arising from Minton and Malone’s paper revealed that there was potential to extend and expand the capability beyond an initial advice and guidance tool into a comprehensive e-APEL service, where “knowledge and abilities acquired through experience are worked on, reformulated into codified propositional knowledge and accredited” (Trowler, 1996). In developing the tool both learners and staff could be supported through the APEL process to produce, evaluate and manage APEL claims.

The demand for APEL has been discussed in a range of fora: the UK Department of Trade and Industry ‘Global Watch Mission’ report on current and anticipated trends in the United States, Beyond e-Learning: practical insights from the USA, highlighted a trend

towards people development based on desired job-related learning outcomes with more emphasis on accreditation, apparently representing a move toward wider use in industry of the problem-based learning approach previously adopted in professions such as medicine (e.g. Staunton and Grant, 1999). These findings are strengthened by the UK skills report, *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills*, by Leitch (2006), which recognises that for sustained economic growth the workforce needs to be qualified to HE Level 4 or above, and that many of these potential learners are already in the workplace. Furthermore Corradi et al. (2006) describe a trend toward increasing attention across Europe to the use of APEL to support the widening participation agenda. These trends suggest that in future the number of learners (and employers) approaching universities and seeking APEL recognition may increase, again supported by Leitch.

The University of Derby has already reported that 85 to 90% of individual learners applying for the Lifelong Learning Scheme also hope to achieve appropriate recognition and accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) (Haldane et al., 2007). The University's process for APEL, which closely follows the Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning from the Quality Assurance Agency (2004), was a largely manual one, with two factors placing a strain on the resources allocated to this process:

- the manual system for APEL could not easily be scaled up to meet the increase in demand;
- much of the work required by APEL needs to be undertaken before the potential student makes a commitment to study and pays any fees.

When exploring the possibility of using technology to support this process, certain parallels were seen between the uses of technology to support diagnostic questioning in the context of online learning at HE level and the diagnostic questioning used in semi-structured APEL (Haldane et al., 2007). However, authors such as Lueddeke (1997) and Pouget and Osbourne (2004) have described a process in which the tutor's probing of the intellectual capabilities previously demonstrated by the learner in the context of developing and applying the knowledge base is essential. Gray (2001) identified the scope for technology to mediate an action-learning approach to work-based learning, with authors such as Ball et al. (2000) describing the capturing of evidence of achievement within e-portfolios, but there appeared to be little evidence to date of this approach being extended to APEL.

This chapter will reflect on the issues arising from the professional discussions at our workshop at Work-based Learning Futures III and at demonstrations of the revised tool, discussing the practical difficulties and perceived barriers to the APEL process and how these can be ameliorated through the use of technology.

## Origin of conversations

Although the University of Derby has seen a significant increase in the demand for APEL, anecdotal evidence from colleagues indicated that this is not reflected across the sector. We were unsure whether this was due to a lack of demand, or a lack of awareness of APEL from both learners and staff. In order to determine the challenges faced by APEL practitioners and learners in HEIs a workshop was held at Work-based Learning Futures III conference, in Derby in 2009, to generate discussion and allow representatives from a variety of organisations (HEIs, LLNs and employers) to identify the challenges and barriers they have personally experienced. These discussions informed the development of enhancements and revisions to the JISC-funded project, to develop a live production version of the e-APEL tool. This updated version has been demonstrated to a number of HEIs in a variety of fora, and comments arising from these have also been collated and incorporated into this discussion.

The Open University's Compendium mind-mapping tool was used to capture the discussions in real time, iteratively, allowing the workshop facilitators to demonstrate that the use of technology, when fit for purpose, can be beneficial to both participants and presenters. The participants were able to see the discussion evolve, encouraging the interactive element of the workshop, which allowed links to be made between the factors identified, enhancing the debate as it happened. This enabled the facilitators to probe contributors, extracting all the relevant information required to develop a richer picture. The use of the software was highly beneficial as it not only afforded real-time data capture, but removed the need for subsequent transcription, making the feedback process more reliable and efficient.

A summary of the mind map is discussed here, with key points for consideration presented below.

## Practical challenges associated with APEL

### *Rationale for the use of APEL and access for learners*

APEL enables learners to gain credit for their experience. It potentially offers them both access to higher education programmes and advanced standing within programmes. This can enable the learners to progress more quickly within a programme of study, which is a benefit to part-time learners. Challis (2004) reports a number of barriers for both staff and students to utilising APEL processes. Our conversations reflect that similar barriers still exist: lack of information of the availability; access to the process; learner perception of what is required; staff workloads; and staff perception.

Learners who are very experienced are often put off by the thought of having to sit in a class of teenagers, learning about things that they have been doing for a significant period of their working lives. If learners can undertake an APEL claim to avoid such repetition of learning, they remain engaged and enthused, rather than becoming bored and frustrated at going over old ground. They focus their attention on new learning – often in the development of academic skills to be able to express this learning in a more recognisable academic format. Some colleagues commented, however, that having such experienced practitioners in a classroom added to the richness of the taught programme, providing younger, or less-experienced peers with valuable opportunities for peer-supported learning. Some commented that this opportunity would be lost if these learners undertook APEL claims and therefore did not attend classes. In our experience, undertaking an APEL claim did not preclude the learner from attending some of the classes and contributing their experience to the discussion – indeed in such cases where the tutor had benefited from an initial review of the e-APEL submission, the tutor was aware of the experience and invited the learner to attend the class, both to contribute to the discussion and the learning of others and to enhance their own confidence about their level of learning prior to submission of a formal claim.

Access to APEL for learners can be difficult. While most HEIs have a policy about APEL and issue guidelines on the processes and procedures, this tends to be regulatory rather than as guidance to the student or member of staff. The findings of the HEA demonstrator project on APEL (Walsh, 2010) concur with this. The availability of APEL is often not ‘advertised’ at university or programme level, leaving the learners to seek it out for themselves, and colleagues at the workshop felt that many are not aware of the facility. Where learners do wish to make a claim, finding the correct member of the academic team for guidance can be difficult, with responsibility and enthusiasm for APEL often resting with a few ‘champions’.

Staff may also recognise the value of APEL to the individual student, but sometimes feel that the amount of work that the student is required to do for an APEL claim is disproportionate to that required by the assessment for the module. Consequently, the experienced may simply be better off ‘coasting’ through the module and undertaking the formal assessment. Staff may also feel that offering support to learners through an APEL claim is more time-consuming for them, as individual guidance and support has to be given.



## Guidance and support for the APEL process

The lack of perceived demand, both from learners and staff, can often lead to lack of clear guidance about how to make the claim, and lack of support during the making of the claim. As Trowler (1996) suggests, “uncertainty about the APEL process also affects institutional responses ... to erect barriers, in this case bureaucratic procedures in an attempt to ensure that standards are maintained”. Our conversations revealed that the main guidance available was about the bureaucracy, rather than how to put together a claim. It was more procedural than pedagogic.

Initial guidance and questioning of learners can be done generically, with more detailed support provided, once the initial guidance is understood. However, such requests for guidance and support often occur on an individual basis, which requires a significant amount of time for the APEL tutor. The tutor needs to have some background knowledge to the learners’ experience to enable them to maximise the amount of APEL claimed. This in itself can be a time-consuming process, with learners themselves not recognising the learning experiences that may be useful to contribute towards a claim, so time needs to be spent in encouraging the learners to articulate their experience and reflect on the learning that they have done. Our conversations reveal that most institutions use a portfolio consisting of the elements outlined by Bloor and Butterworth (1990):

- abstract summarising the learning claim;
- list of learning outcomes/level indicators;
- reflective writing analysing the learning and linking it to the learning outcomes;
- evidence to support the learning.

The e-APEL tool does contain all of these key elements and aids in the structuring of the reflective writing to ensure that learners link the learning to the identified outcomes. Challis (2004) notes that the portfolio development can itself be a developmental process, facilitating and encouraging learners to develop the skills of reflection, evaluation and analysis, which will be usefully developed within a higher education context.

Recognising learning experience from the workplace enhances the learners’ self-confidence by demonstrating that the university values vocational experience and the translation of theory into practice. Often these learners have not been involved in study for a significant period of time and may lack confidence in their ability to study, or indeed may not know how to study at higher education level. By valuing these experiences, and encouraging them to write about familiar subjects, relating these to higher education

level indicators, confidence is gained, and learners begin to understand the way in which to construct discussions relating theory to practice. In the preparation of the APEL claim they also begin to understand the language and jargon of HE.

At some HEIs there is a financial benefit to learners who undertake APEL instead of the formal module, with a reduction in fees for the module(s) undertaken. This can be done on a modular basis or on a sliding scale dependent on the amount of credit being claimed. At our institution learners pay 30% of the module fees, but our conversations reveal that there is no standard approach in the sector, with some adopting a sliding scale dependent on the volume of credit claimed and others charging the same fee as if the module were to be taught.

### How does the e-APEL tool address the barriers?

In order to upscale the availability of APEL and maximise the potential use of APEL by learners, a comprehensive guide, with 'just in time' support is required to reduce the number of individual tutorials and also enhance the quality of such one-to-one interactions, focusing less on generic support for the process and more on the individual experience of the learner. Our conversations revealed that there is an increasing demand for individually negotiated work-based learning programmes, which are often run by a small team of enthusiastic academics who cannot cope with a large increase in the amount of APEL activity. However, in developing the tool we recognised that much of the initial support, encouraging the learners to reflect on their learning to date and to begin to match it to HE level indicators, could be done electronically, adopting a structured approach based upon our experience using the Learning through Work site offered by UFI. We recognised that by offering such a facility we would enable learners to prepare for a more in-depth discussion, which gave them confidence as well as a basic understanding of some of the terminology used in HE.

It soon became apparent that, if we were able to 'automate' some of the process, we would also be able to enhance awareness of APEL to the learners across the University. This could additionally serve as a useful marketing tool to attract non-traditional learners and part-time learners to the University.

### The estimator/claim tool

The development team recognise that the tool could be used both for learners on

existing programmes, who had a clear goal and learning ambition, and for those new to or tentatively enquiring about higher education, who had no experience of the language or any clear idea of what they wanted to learn. The tool needed to be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of both types of learner, while educating them in the terminology of higher education. In order to achieve this the language was simplified to ensure clarity while promoting confidence in the learners that they had the required knowledge to study at HE level. It was deemed necessary to include some academic key terminology and references, as this would be an important part of preparation for the initial tutor discussion and, if successful, their future academic study. Therefore, a glossary of terms was included within the guidance text to introduce this language to the learners at the relevant process stage. This empowerment of the learners was seen in our conversations to be a key feature of good APEL practice and is echoed by Walsh (2010).

Of particular importance was the availability of guidance at the point that it was needed; for example, 'just in time' guidance, which used real-world examples to illustrate and support the learners' reflection. A key requirement of the tool was that this guidance text needed to be easily accessed and edited by the academics themselves, contextualising the guidance to the circumstances, and should not require specialist programming skills.

It was important that the learners found the tool accessible, that it had a logical flow, but that they could go back to put in further information if additional thoughts occurred to them as they became more immersed in the reflective process. To address this requirement, the learner was asked to register, enabling them to log in and out of the system as they desired and build up their proposal in a time frame they felt comfortable with. A workflow structure was introduced so that the learner was guided through the process and this worked particularly well as it clearly illustrated when each section was completed and what sections were left outstanding.

Our conversations suggest that some learners, particularly those from a professional background, would have a CV or other background information that could be useful to support the initial estimation. We felt passionately that this should be an encouraging and facilitative process that empowered the learners to enter an informed discussion with their tutor. The emphasis should therefore be on eliciting and shaping the information, rather than process-driven completion of a form. The inclusion of a CV was a vital addition to this as the information contained within it may identify key areas of previous learning that the learners themselves may not have identified as being relevant to their proposal. We also recognised that the amount of work required should not be onerous, as this was an information-gathering exercise for the learner; thus an hour's worth of work should produce something meaningful to be submitted to a tutor for estimation. It was important for the tutors to recognise that the tools were merely a light-touch

scoping exercise for the learner and that this would hopefully then lead to enrolment and a more in-depth discussion leading to a claim.

The key focus of the estimator tool was to enable the learners to articulate their learning experiences by offering structured guidance so that they can be matched to the relevant higher education level indicator. This was identified by the highly experienced academic experts within the project team, and in our conversations with fellow APEL practitioners, as one of the more difficult concepts for the learners to grasp, as the statements are decontextualised and generic, and for some impenetrable. In light of this the level indicator statements were rewritten, simplifying the language used and, where possible, removing the academic terminology that led to ambiguities. We also felt that for some learners it would be useful to match their experience against the programme learning outcomes, if they were sure about the programme that they were undertaking.

We found that although we had developed guidance materials to support learners to develop an APEL claim, this did not easily translate into the tool. It worked well when supported by tutorial discussion, but did not work on its own – the language was too austere and formal; it did not encourage or facilitate. The first draft of the tool had a similar feel – it was written from an academic perspective rather than that of the learners. It was not supportive or encouraging, but relied on the tone similar to that of the regulatory materials that we had previously criticised. We had focused too much on what we as academics had wanted the learners to produce, rather than what the learners needed to know to enable them to understand the process. The language of the tool was amended iteratively with advice from non-academic members of the team, and past and present learners, to highlight key flaws such as the language and complexity, which could act as a potential barrier if not corrected.

Rewriting the level indicators to be meaningful, both to the learners and to the tutors, to enable a judgement about academic level to be made was a major challenge. We needed to enable the learners to select the most appropriate level indicator, without bias, so that a realistic estimate of the experience can be made. However, the language needed to be suitably generic so that it did not lean towards a particular context or subject. This was difficult as we recognised that learners found this process easier if they could identify with particular actions or experiences by giving examples. The format of the tool was also structured to facilitate the reflective process, as outlined by Bloor and Butterworth (1990), as much as possible for the learners by asking them to work through the statements, first identifying their own level of competency, then matching their prior learning, and finally submitting the justification for the selection. This allows the learner to build up the self-reflective aspects of the process and enables them to broaden their scope by potentially identifying further prior learning. One of the key

requirements of this tool was that the level indicator statements could be replaced by any other level statements – such as National Occupational Standards, programme learning outcomes, professional criteria or other similar measures against which learners could match their learning experiences, ensuring that the tool could be used within other institutions and for other applications such as CPD.

The final element – evidencing the learning – is enabled by the ability to upload documents in a variety of formats, to encompass most of the modern media used in the workplace currently. Evidence can be appended in standard Word documents, video and image files, as well as imports from Leap2A compatible e-portfolios, to reduce duplication of activity.

### The advisor tool

Our conversations with tutors identified that the main requirement for the advisor tool was that it produce an output easy to review and comment upon, with sufficient detail to make a reasonable judgement about the scope and level of the experience initially, but that this annotation could then be worked upon by the learners to enhance and formulate a formal claim for learning. This enables the tutor to offer focused and specific guidance to the learners on how to write the proposal and the nature of the required evidence in order to make a full claim.

An APEL matrix, which matches learning experiences to learning outcomes/level indicators, providing two of the key elements of Bloor and Butterworth's (1990) portfolio, is used as the first screen the tutors see upon opening a proposal. It offers a visual summary of the information presented by the learner that can be expanded upon in more detail as required. The tutor has the flexibility to evaluate the overall proposal or to go deeper and evaluate each piece of prior learning. The use of preset evaluation criteria means that feedback to the learners is consistent, promoting best practice among the tutors themselves.

The availability of guidance to tutors and the rich resource of a number of diverse APEL claims held in a single place were found to be very useful in our conversations with APEL practitioners. They found that the tool was particularly useful for staff development purposes, to reassure and support tutors through the process. It reduced the amount of one-to-one tutorial time and therefore partially removed one of the key barriers staff perceived to be a problem with APEL. We have also found it useful to facilitate moderation of APEL claims, both by internal and external moderators.

Managing APEL claims was seen to be an operational problem by some tutors. By

introducing a colour-coded filer system, the tutor can quickly review the site to see the status of claims, so that reviewing the site need not be onerous – one click enables the tutor to see if any submissions are outstanding and whether there has been a response from the learners. Tutors need this to be a clear and visual representation of the claim to facilitate the estimation and assessment appropriately. An in-tray icon clearly denotes the status of the claim.

## Summary

The JISC e-APEL project allowed a working first version of the tools to be developed that was subsequently piloted on a small scale, and resulted in a proof of concept that the initial stages of the APEL process can be automated. This in turn informed the development of a production version of the tool that has been used with employer clients and sold to other universities.

The continuing need for the crucial role of the academic in offering tutor/claimant dialogue at the formal claim stage is recognised. However, the resource-intensive, pre-entry guidance stage has been successfully automated, thereby addressing one of the key barriers identified within our conversations. This is beneficial to the practitioners in freeing time to concentrate on offering support at the claim stage. It also enhances the quality of the information that the potential claimant brings to the initial discussion. This in turn makes the first discussion more effective, enhancing the experience for both. Such discussions can be facilitated at a distance and the comments recorded onto the system by the tutor for ongoing guidance, in preparation for a formal claim, which now can be accommodated by the tool. This is reflected in the learners' increased knowledge and understanding of key academic terminology, promoting confidence in their first tutor discussion and reducing potential perceived barriers.

The tool has promoted and developed discussion about support and guidance for APEL claims, as well as the assessment of such claims. At the demonstrations we have found that much of the discussion has been about regulations and processes for the assessment of APEL, rather than simply guidance tools for the learners; as such, an emergent community of practice has begun to develop – those who use the tool making suggestions to further enhance functionality, but also commenting about the concepts and processes of APEL that further develop and stretch academic thinking in this area. It is intended therefore we continue to develop this community of practice, by means of a user group, but the tool will be the springboard for the discussion rather than its focus, with an aim to embed APEL practice more widely within the sector. By striving to undertake further research activity in this area we hope to gain wider acceptance of the practice, challenging and driving thinking within the sector.

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## Supporting staff in flexible learning development

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### Abstract

In this chapter, we describe how and why the University of Southampton wrote its Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Guide, a practical guide intended to support University staff working on TEL projects. We set the context for the TEL Guide; describe the rationale for its development, content and tone of voice; and include excerpts from



### The main arguments are that:

- effective management of TEL production and implementation by those directly involved in TEL projects is a prerequisite for success;
- academic leaders and managers need to allocate specific time to academics for them to get sufficiently equipped and thoroughly involved in TEL;
- there is a need to increase staff capacity in the use of technology that will create new or enhanced opportunities for students, and also enable staff to access new technologies that offer them additional benefits;
- practical measures must be put in place to build this staff capability in order to stimulate widespread change in learning and teaching practice.

The chapter includes quotations from staff that capture the ‘key things that matter’ when they develop TEL solutions. It ends with a summary of lessons learned and challenges for institutions to consider and act upon.

We argue that if campus-based universities are genuinely seeking to embed



technology-enhanced components in learning and teaching practice, they must take steps to allocate specific time to build staff capability and to make TEL part of 'normal teaching practice' for everyone, i.e. embedding 'digital'. We argue that institutions must support academics by, not only providing a technical support infrastructure that they can use if they choose to (e.g. a virtual learning environment), but enabling and equipping them to engage more thoroughly with digital communications of all kinds. Only in this way, by harnessing the energy and enthusiasm of academics, will TEL have sufficient impact on the experience of today's and tomorrow's students.

## Context

### The University of Southampton

The University of Southampton is a UK teaching and research institution with a global reputation for research and scholarship across a wide range of subjects in engineering, science, social sciences, health, arts and humanities. It has a strong reputation for Engineering, Computer Science and Medicine, combining academic excellence with an innovative and entrepreneurial approach to research. The University seeks to support a culture that engages and challenges students and staff in their pursuit of learning. The University is also home to a number of world-leading research centres, including: the National Oceanography Centre, Southampton; the Institute of Sound and Vibration Research; the Optoelectronics Research Centre; the Centre for the Developmental Origins of Health and Disease; and the Southampton Statistical Sciences Research Institute.

In this context, and with the appointment of a new vice-chancellor, the University is changing rapidly. It is committed to achieving transformation in the structure, quality and flexibility of its educational programmes to offer students a distinctive Southampton educational experience. Developing its own people for the future is seen as a priority. The University's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit

The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit (LATEU) was established in August 2006 to promote the quality agenda across the University. As the University has adopted the definition of 'quality' as being that of transformation (change), LATEU is a key element in supporting change and the various change agents employed at all levels in the University. It aims to constantly improve the learning experience of its students. There are two key aspects to its work: quality assurance (working with and evaluating results) and quality enhancement (supporting change).

- Quality assurance is a core component of our work, ensuring alignment with national and professional standards and benchmarks.
- Quality enhancement shifts the focus away from simply meeting minimum standards within limited areas. The QAA definition of quality enhancement, “taking deliberate steps to bring about continuous improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students”, has the same basis as our definition of quality.

Among other things, LATEU delivers a wide range of CPD for staff, ranging from a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice to courses, workshops and lunchtime learning sessions, with its staff being available for coaching and support too.

The University’s Employer Engagement Initiative (EEI)

The University’s original bid for funding from the HEFCE workforce development programme was broad, containing both specific employer-related activities and a range of sub-projects to support changes in systems, procedures and staff development. The range of sub projects was developed in the broadest possible sense, and included a desire to examine flexible provision (in this case any approach that was not standard face-to-face interaction) across the University and share good practice.

The funding has been used to engage employers more closely in the identification and expansion of professional development opportunities, primarily at Masters level. Working with other bodies, we have sought input from employers in a number of sectors to define the needs of their staff and identify areas for collaboration.

Most of the University’s schools are already involved in some short course or professional development delivery, and the project has been able to bring together information about these courses with a view to promoting them to a wider audience and extending its continuing professional development (CPD) provision.

The University has a rich pool of international research to share, and within the EEI we have been working alongside two of our interdisciplinary strategic research groups, Maritime and Energy, as a focus for our engagement with industry and the corresponding Sector Skills Councils. An important task has been to seek out the views of employers in the region and to capture their views on what they want from the University.

An additional aim was to further develop our capacity to provide cutting-edge courses as stand-alone or within a Masters-level programme. Importantly, these courses should be delivered flexibly, which could take the form of distance learning, intensive week programmes or work-based learning.

Specifically, the EEI aimed to develop guidelines to streamline the process of developing TEL opportunities or programmes. The guidelines would provide examples of practice, contacts and resources, and take an individual through the necessary stages to

develop a high quality TEL resource. In relation to this, the University's EEL committed to develop pilot programmes or courses for distance learning, with a strong emphasis on TEL – and to develop a guide to support staff participating in TEL projects.

#### Technology-enhanced learning at the University

There is already considerable expertise in TEL inside the University and a high level of activity in faculties, with some disciplines (such as Medicine, Health Sciences and Languages) using TEL extensively. Below is just a small sample of the TEL work that the University is undertaking.

#### Virtual patients and e-portfolios

Along with many other academic groups, Medicine has a dedicated e-Learning team with staff from the University's iSolutions Division. Aiming to provide a step change in the level and quantity of TEL provided within the School's Bachelor of Medicine (BM) programmes, Medicine uses patient case studies derived from actual patient cases and scripted 'virtual' cases based on common, realistic scenarios. With links to online medical resources, detailed feedback and availability for revision, students can progress at their own pace and experience consistent teaching practice that is not always achievable when using a large number of tutors. Alongside other University e-portfolio initiatives, Medicine is also investigating the potential use of e-portfolios within the BM programmes as a means of helping future healthcare professionals to plan and record their own personal, educational and career development.

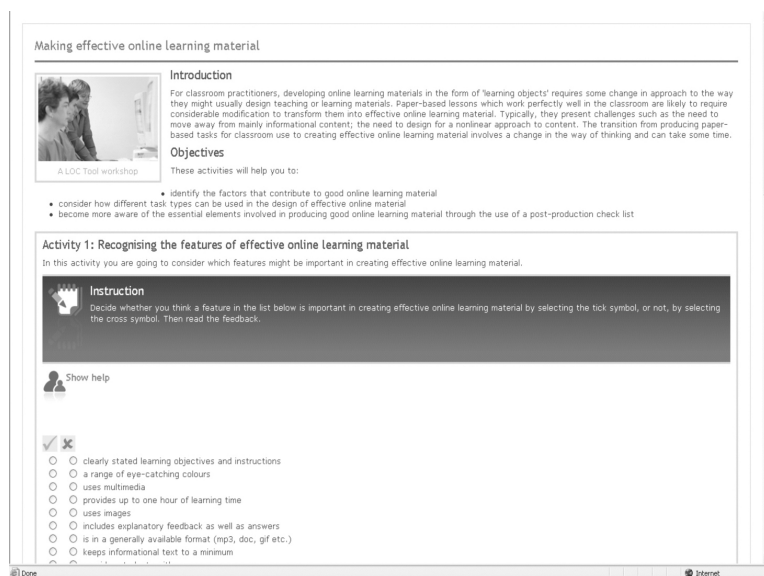
#### University Island in Second Life

The University of Southampton Island in Second Life was established in 2008, and through collaboration between the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit and the Communications team, is now becoming an active educational and research resource. The University has brought together and managed a range of discipline-specific projects on its island, in Archaeology, Education, Modern Languages, Chemistry and Medicine, for example. The 'MUVE, Moodle and Microblogging' project (conducted by Modern Languages) integrated Second Life, Moodle and Twitter in a pre-arrival five-week online Moodle course for international students preparing to live and study in the UK. Featuring a Language Café and a range of interactive in-world learning resources, it helps introduce students to Southampton through a range of TEL activities and resource types, helping them to become accustomed to the distinctive Southampton educational experience.



### University of Southampton Island eLanguages' Learning Object Creator (LOC)

The LOC authoring tool – a piece of teacher-friendly software for creating online learning materials – was developed in-house by eLanguages (in Modern Languages) in collaboration with the HEA LLAS Subject Centre. It provides a complete start-up kit for helping teachers to make effective reusable online resources to support their own students and includes a learning object creation tool with embedded pedagogic design tips, example outputs, planner, post-production checklist and a choice of style sheets. The tool is straightforward to use and the Subject Centre has been delivering LOC training workshops across the country. To date, 12 workshops have been delivered (four at the University of Southampton, three at conference and six at other institutions, with a further two planned this year). Around 200 teachers have so far received training and some are now cascading training within their own institutions. One workshop participant who used the LOC tool was runner-up in a national competition on producing online learning material.



Created with LOC tool

## The University of Southampton experience

The Committee of Inquiry into the Changing Learner Experience (2009) points out that using technology to enliven and enhance learning places new demands on tutors. Its report, *Higher Education in a Web 2.0 World*, highlights the central role that tutors play in designing the student experience and recommends that institutions focus on developing staff skills: “For staff it means ensuring technical proficiency, reflection on approaches to learning and teaching, and the development of practice, and skills in practice, of e-pedagogy – learning with and/or through technology – so that when they choose to use technology, they can do so effectively.”

For tutors accustomed to researching in traditional ways and delivering content in traditional forms, keeping pace with these trends is a challenge. New skills do not arise without investing time and energy in their acquisition. It can be hard for an academic team to engage at a sufficiently deep level if such time is not available and if they are do not have sufficient support from specialists accompanying them on the journey. As the same report highlights, an interest in digital learning, enthusiasm for TEL, and a willingness to explore the possibilities within one’s own academic sphere are essential prerequisites if TEL initiatives are to get off the ground and have a life beyond initial seed funding. A certain level of digital literacy comes into the mix too. It is important for an academic

team to be equipped, particularly at the outset of a project, with sufficient understanding and experience of digital media and communications. For example, if an academic team has not been exposed to wikis for working collaboratively on documents, to using social media for learning or to participating in online forums, their capacity to conceive of solutions utilising those TEL approaches is likely to be constrained. We argue that it is a priority to develop academics' interest and active engagement in new digital forms. While certain academic areas have high levels of experience and expertise and have had sufficient available resource to undertake TEL, others have not been in a position to establish a sufficient body of dedicated expertise on the ground or to develop it across an academic team. Some academic areas do not consider TEL to be as appropriate to their academic programmes as others do.

The University continues to undertake many TEL projects for academic purposes. It also has a number of internal special interest groups, best practice forums and specialist networks that meet formally and informally or contribute to University or faculty projects. The TEL Special Interest Group meets regularly, drawing together practitioners from across the University and contributing to University TEL policy. The University has a network of educational advisers too, based in faculties, schools or the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit (LATEU). They have exceptionally valuable expertise and experience. Being located in faculties or schools (structurally and in practical terms) means that they work alongside academic teams and are able to support them in a variety of ways.

Complementary to these learning and teaching projects, Electronics and Computer Science has a Learning Societies Lab (LSL), which researches TEL. Among other areas, it is currently investigating: architectures for learning systems and for assessment; design for learning; competency modelling; digital libraries; m-learning; and learning objects and repositories.

## The Technology Enhanced Learning Guide

### Phased approach

The EEI team agreed early on that the TEL Guide was to be a published document that was easy for everyone to find, access, read on screen and, if required, print. We agreed a four-step plan:

- 1. Investigate – engage with an academic team and consult University staff;*
- 2. Write – write, obtain review comments and revise (current phase, June 2010);*
- 3. Publish – launch and disseminate;*
- 4. Learn – obtain feedback, review and revise.*

## Investigate

There were two strands of investigation: one working with an academic team and another strand that involved consulting colleagues across the University.

An academic team was interested in enhancing a Masters programme for which there was considerable demand, not only from the UK but from international students too. In order to convert certain modules into distance delivery form and to move towards a distance learning format, the EEL team commissioned a learning design consultant to work alongside the academic team. We used the experience gained from this to establish the existing capacity in the University to support people undertaking TEL and this helped us to produce the TEL Guide, which incorporated lessons learned during the process.

The exercise revealed the importance of assigning specific time to such a project. It also highlighted the risks associated in having 'long thin' projects rather than 'short fat' projects. Most projects benefit from deep engagement alongside colleagues and opportunities to talk through new ideas 'in the moment'. Dedicating a block of time to reviewing current learning and teaching methods and considering new approaches (even small amounts of time) is far more beneficial than assigning small amounts of time spread over a longer period. However, with real competing priorities (i.e. current teaching and research commitments), the allocation of a block of time was unrealistic without major changes of priority. This had an impact on continuity and momentum.

This also meant that the academic team had insufficient time to consider new methods fully and to try out new ideas, so an easily understandable (lecture-based) concept rapidly became the solution of choice. The team decided to focus on rerecording lecture presentations using Adobe Presenter. This easy-to-use tool enabled the team to provide slides presented in Adobe Presenter's menu system, audio delivery of the content and speaker notes (i.e. the recording) in text form concurrently alongside each slide, all presented in the Adobe Presenter interface and accessible to students on Blackboard, the University virtual learning environment (VLE). The recorded lecture has always been intended to be part of a wider learning solution and the team is currently considering how best to take the project forward.

Alongside this work, the Learning Designer consulted the TEL Special Interest Group and various TEL specialists across the University, inviting them to contribute their experiences and asking them how they would advise academic colleagues who were getting involved in TEL. Their experiences were extremely helpful, helping to shape the scope and content of the TEL Guide.

## Scope and audience

The TEL Guide is intended to capture and provide guidance to all staff considering/starting out/working with TEL and has been written so that it may be picked up and used by anybody, for example:

- new academic staff;
- staff new to TEL practice;
- staff already familiar with the ideas, to use as a reference.

It will also be used as part of the University's own Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PCAP).

thinking about using technology for learning?  
starting out in technology enhanced learning?  
what are the big issues to consider?  
what quality issues are involved?  
where is this happening in the university?  
who can I talk to about my ideas?

Jargon free (and definitely not intended for TEL specialists), it was intended to be highly readable, accessible and motivational. The introduction, below, describes what readers can expect from it.



## Introduction to the University of Southampton's TEL Guide

Technology is changing how students learn and how we research.

Perhaps you want to use technology to enhance communication or improve student support. You may want create a distance learning activity, a flexibly delivered module or indeed a whole course. You may simply want to find out where to find authoritative information, or to see what support exists for this type of work.

The University is committed to delivering high quality learning and teaching, using technology where appropriate, in order to offer a distinctive Southampton educational experience. Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL), also known as e-learning, is becoming increasingly important to students, teaching staff and the institution.

This guide highlights some of the most important matters to consider. It is intended to help you to tackle the key issues that determine the success of TEL projects and to work on those projects in a considered way. Written with the input of colleagues from around the University, it prompts you to ask important questions and points you to sources of up-to-date knowledge and advice.

Technology changes rapidly. This guide is about managing the work in a practical way.

The University supports the use of a variety of TEL approaches for teaching and learning and colleagues are ready to offer their experience and advice. Each person has distinctive skills and specific experiences. No single person will have all the answers you are looking for. Be ready to investigate alternative approaches that suit you and your students' needs in different ways.

Investigation revealed that the pedagogic and management aspects of setting up and moving forward TEL work were key to success. This backed up our initial rationale for the TEL Guide. The EEI team concluded that TEL initiatives either succeed or fail at an early stage – around key matters such as resourcing, access to available capability and a 'whole team' approach.

As we already knew from experience on other projects, technology issues are far more easily resolved if important management matters are tackled early and if effective teamwork practices are put in place.

The TEL Guide covers: QA matters relating to flexible and distributed learning;

guiding principles (e.g. for choosing a particular technology); making choices about using learning media, learning design and student workload; and managing TEL work.

An important part of LATEU's role in the University is to connect people who share similar interests in learning and teaching enhancement, so it provides internal points of contact and advice and external sources of advice too, based on the premise that most colleagues value talking with someone within their institution who has undertaken a similar journey.

The EEI team found that University colleagues' descriptions of their experiences were so helpful that their direct quotations were included in the Guide too.

#### Quotations – your colleagues have said...

This is what some of your University of Southampton colleagues say of their experiences...

*What were your lessons learned?*

“Allow sufficient time, don't underestimate.”

“Build in quality from the start.”

“Recognise that nothing will be an instant success.”

“The single biggest obstacle is funding for new projects.”

“It's important to work with colleagues who are keen to use technology and have the support of their line managers to write content. It's not just about technology!”

“Simple robust systems work best.”

*What would have helped you the most?*

“More of a strategic approach within the department (this is now improving).”

“Sufficient resources and a tightly knit team.”

“Access to Instructional Design expertise plus more time/resources to backfill academics, so they could spend more time scripting material.”

“Examples in place to stimulate ideas of online courses at the outset.”

“Help starting this within a budget (limited!)”

*What would you say to someone starting out?*

“Create a plan first, then worry about the technology.”

“Talk to as many people as possible but don’t be put off by other people’s imperatives on do’s and don’ts – they can only advise you on their own experiences and are unlikely to be familiar with the academic content of your course.”

“Consult the people who are going to be expected to use the learning materials before developing them. Don’t second guess what people need – quite often this is very ill-advised.”

“There are plenty of people and resources to access, ask for guidance from people you already know – staff in the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit are especially helpful.”

“Think big, but create a step-by-step project plan.”

The TEL Guide was written in late 2009. It is published on the University intranet and is easily printable should anyone want a hard copy; it is the basis of a talk by the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit to academic teams across the University, or as the basis for one-to-one coaching on request. Our next piece of work is to capture feedback on the document, establish how widely it is being used and how it can be enhanced.

Despite The TEL Guide being focused on managing TEL projects effectively, it is heartening to see the words that shine out most strongly in its ‘wordle’ (below).



### A 'wordle' showing frequency of words in the TEL Guide

We believe that the TEL Guide is a flexible document that stresses student learning should be at the forefront of every decision and that people, time, resources, technology and support are all essential contributory factors to success.

Summary: lessons learned and challenges

The EEL work has generated a community of practice and stimulated debate around University needs for the future; for example, we organised a meeting of minds from key TEL projects in 2009. We found that resourceful individuals are driving the TEL agenda at present, drawing upon personal knowledge, experience and contacts to do new and exciting things. Moving such activity towards a larger-scale endeavour will require investment and careful consideration in order to make it easier for academic teams to equip themselves with 21st-century digital skills.

It is clear that academic time, energy and commitment are needed to develop new forms of learning and teaching. Such time needs to be allocated by academic leaders and managers, so that academic teams have sufficient incentive to get fully involved. We are currently supporting a small academic team in writing a distance learning programme from scratch. Work to date suggests that it may be more effective in relation to both cost and high quality learning outcomes to develop a distance learning programme from scratch. Rethinking existing learning and teaching materials and versioning them for delivery in new forms brings legacy issues that may simply get in the way of the opportunities that new forms of learning provide.

The process of investigating and writing the TEL Guide brought to light more activity across the University than was expected. There was considerable TEL work taking place, with academics simply getting on and developing TEL, with sometimes limited support, and with a diversity of approaches and outcomes. This offers a rich experience base on which to draw and we continue to receive feedback on the TEL Guide and the recommendations that it makes for everyday practice. We are discussing opportunities for embedding practice and offering staff development opportunities that will make best appropriate use of new and emerging technologies.

“A jargon free accessible guide. It points you in the right direction and takes you through the process” Dr Rachel Mills, Associate Dean,  
University of Southampton

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## Quality assurance of learning solutions with employers: rapid response and fit for purpose?

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### Introduction

While the world has moved on in many ways since the publication of the Leitch Report in December 2006, the strategic challenge set for higher education in responding to Leitch has not changed. Enhancing the higher level learning achievements of the current UK workforce remains an essential element of improving business performance. Leitch recommended that universities needed to work closely with employers to ensure that the workforce had access to the provision of higher education to meet the skills and development needs for the economic growth of the country, given that the majority of those in need of HE were already in the workplace. It is clear that 'more of the same', traditionally taught, full-time or day release courses, would not address these needs, and more innovative solutions were called for. Tallantyre (2010) specified the need for highly flexible approaches in relation to:

- content negotiated with employers and employees;
- learning situated in the workplace, or at least off-campus;
- learning delivered at a distance or through technology;
- learning delivered at times and pace to suit the learners;
- the deployment of forms of assessment perceived as relevant to work activity;
- assessment based on more generic learning outcomes;
- learning collected into shorter credit or award-bearing packages – so-called 'bite-sized provision'.

The development of credit-bearing short awards can encourage learners to develop their knowledge, competence and skills by engaging in the workplace with learning opportunities related to the principles and practices of their work. They can bring HE within the workplace and employment within the HE curriculum. However, it is critically important that such programmes are explicitly located within the Framework for Higher

Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and can demonstrate that they operate within a robust framework for the assurance of quality and standards.

Such programmes will vary in relation to their academic level and volume of credit. Our experience suggests that employers do not necessarily require whole awards to achieve the learning objectives for their business. This experience is reflected, together with that of other HEIs, in the HEA Work-based Learning Impact Study (Nixon, 2008), which acknowledges the value that employers and employees placed on short HE programmes of only 30 credits. However, there is still demand by employers for full programmes of study leading to major awards, as indicated by the success of foundation degrees, and subsequent progression to full Honours awards.

Approvals mechanisms need to take account of a spectrum of requirements from shorter awards (for example, 30 credits – notionally 300 hours of learning – is the smallest University of Derby award) to major qualifications at all levels from Certificate of Higher Education to Masters degrees. Further, the contribution of employer partners to the provision needs to be recognised in the university's procedures for approving collaborative programmes. Additionally, there is a need to recognise that the workplace is a legitimate site for the production of higher level skills and knowledge, either through a system for accrediting experiential learning (APEL), through which individuals can claim recognition for their prior learning, or by endorsing appropriate in-company training and development activities. Increasingly employers are seeking to validate or accredit such provision within the HE framework to enable their staff to gain qualifications and credit from such opportunities. Just as universities need to work with employers to develop programmes of study, they equally need mechanisms to be able to recognise such learning within their provision, subject to robust quality assurance mechanisms (Graham et al., 2008).

Quality assurance issues relating to university-level provision developed for and with employers are critical to the employer engagement agenda. For the education to be recognised and valued, both by the sector and the employers, the quality assurance mechanisms must reflect the expectations of higher education generally. Clearly, quality assurance processes for such activity must be robust – the 'university' imprimatur is, after all, why employers are engaging with higher education rather than with a training provider. However, in order to meet business requirements and timescales, these processes should be proportionate, fit for purpose and not constrained by the artificial constructs of the academic year and procedures designed for full-time students.

Drawing on the experience of two demonstrator projects (Whitemore and Minton, 2010; Haddleton, 2010), which collated the experience of a number of partner universities in the areas of designing bespoke provision and accreditation of in-company training, we have developed a model for consideration by those who are considering the development of processes and procedures for employer-responsive provision.

We identify three key areas of focus – the three ‘P’s for employer engagement:

- people;
- principles;
- practice.

Each area underpins the actions of the others, and thus a holistic approach to employer engagement is promoted within a university in which employer engagement activity is embedded within the core values and mission of the institution.

Each ‘P’ is considered under a series of key themes:

- institutional approaches;
- curriculum development;
- approvals mechanisms;
- QA arrangements for implementation.

When considered together, the areas of focus and their themes provide an overview of the key considerations for the development and enhancement of employer-responsive provision.

## People

Key staff are needed at both institutional and faculty management level, to ensure that the organisational infrastructure will enable employer engagement activity to work for employers. They are also needed at programme level to ensure that employer needs are genuinely being met, rather than repackaging existing provision for the convenience of the university. Employer engagement activity should be an integrated part of academic workload planning. This can be a challenge, as it is difficult to plan at the beginning of the academic year for requests that come all year round. Work-based learning and employer engagement should be valued equally with other teaching and learning and research



activity.

High level support at VC/PVC/Dean level is essential, so that key decision makers can influence the wider university systems to develop an infrastructure that supports and enables a proactive response to employers. This is supported by the findings of a joint study from CIHE and the University of Exeter (Bolden et al., 2009).

It is important to employ and develop academics who are comfortable and familiar with working with employers, understanding their needs and the way that they work. These academics need to understand academic quality mechanisms and key benchmarks, and to be able to 'translate' and 'harmonise' between employers and academia in the development phase.

Within University of Derby Corporate (UDC) at the University of Derby, we have developed a new career route for academic staff who have a flair for involvement in employer engagement activity. These are Workforce Development Fellows (WDF) and their role combines the following:

- innovative skills in curriculum development and assessment design, embedding learning and assessment within real work activity;
- an in-depth knowledge and understanding of quality assurance mechanisms to facilitate the development and approval of negotiated work-based provision;
- researching work-based learning as a field of study, to promote and enhance teaching, learning and assessment activity in the field.

WDFs have a clear role in developing and leading other academics in addressing the needs of employers to develop provision that is academically robust and fit for purpose. This in turn will grow the capability of faculty to deliver to employers.

Academic tutors involved at individual engagement level need to ensure that learners' and employers' needs are reflected in the curriculum and its implementation, particularly with regard to contextualisation of the curriculum.

Each interaction with an employer will have a key driver. It is vital that this is identified and acknowledged by the development team and incorporated into a clear rationale for the development. As the institution becomes more experienced and active in employer engagement, the need to develop new curriculum appears to decrease, as within particular subject areas there are key learning needs for all employers, irrespective of sector. What does change is the specific selection from the curriculum 'menu', and the wider context of the situation of learning.

Key liaison staff should be identified within the support departments of the university (Registry/Quality, IT, Library, Student Records) to ensure that the

infrastructure supports the needs of the employer engagement activity. Quality will have an interest in the people involved with the development of the curriculum, how ideas are generated and the determination of the assessment strategy (see QAA, 2010, para 32). There also needs to be a key contact at the employer who will act as a liaison between the two organisations and champion the programme within the organisation. They need to be supported by an executive-level sponsor within their own organisation who will overcome barriers and demonstrate to potential learners that the employer values the qualification. This is particularly important where the accreditation of in-company training is being considered, to ensure that the collaborative processes of the university are managed slickly and efficiently.

### Principles

Employer engagement activity needs to be recognised and valued by the institution as being of equal standing to traditional UG and PG provision and research activity, rather than as a peripheral offer. Garnett et al. (2008) have commented extensively about the policy aspects of this work and the concept of 'structural capital'.

The overarching principles of curriculum design are that:

- it reflects QAA level descriptors;
- it has intellectual rigour;
- it possesses the overarching characteristics of work at HE level.

Assessment strategies should be founded in work-based learning, reflecting the use of real work activity, such as exploring business developments and development of professional skills that are relevant and fit for purpose. The latter should be reflected in the title of the award. There are key challenges here in evidencing the relevant number of hours of learning effort, given that these learners will bring to the programme a significant amount of experience and expertise, and the learning is situated in the workplace .

Approval mechanisms should be founded in QAA precepts but tailored to meet the need of this type of provision. The use of a shell framework, with delegated powers of approval was found within the demonstrator project to be the most common type of mechanism to facilitate such approval (Whitemore and Minton, 2010).

Good practice key factors determining an approvals mechanism should be based on risk and proportionality – ensuring fitness for purpose when dealing in the business

environment, where timescales can be crucial. The challenges faced relate particularly to credit-rated provision, and more so when such credit is linked to the achievement of an award:

A number of respondents noted that a focus on responsiveness could introduce an element of risk:

*‘...responsiveness (in terms of approval of provision, award of credit); recognition of the scale of provision (often small amounts of credit, as opposed to whole programmes of study).’*

*‘The process should have the same rigour, but arriving at this state by different means. The whole system has to be sufficiently flexible in order to meet employer and institutional needs. Quality assurance has to meet the complexity and flexibility of: a) negotiated learning - the timing of delivery, start and end dates etc; b) negotiated provision with the employer and the learner.’*

*‘...the challenge of balancing appropriate oversight with the speed of responsiveness employers want.’*

(QAA, 2010, para 29)

Proportionality is evidenced in a tiered or differential approach in some institutions, based on the volume of credit and the level of the credit, with a standing panel of external examiners/advisers being asked to review proposals. Other institutions utilise a preapproved set of generic learning outcomes or short course descriptors, which also addresses the issue of externality as part of the approvals mechanism (Whitemore and Minton, 2010; Haddleton, 2010).

Shell frameworks, with delegated powers within set parameters, are often used, offering clear and robust mechanisms for the approval of programmes, including the accreditation of in-company training, and the associated title within a business time frame (Willis, 2008). The parameters vary between institutions and are often related to the volume and level of credit, but also may relate to whether the provision is designated as collaborative.

*Employer-responsive provision involves a range of quality assurance considerations relating to:*

- the types of partnerships and the corresponding forms of agreements required
- the setting and maintaining of academic standards
- the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students
- the involvement of employers and learners in the design, delivery and assessment of learning.

(QAA, 2010, para 38)

Accepted good practice, derived from experience with both short awards (Whitemore and Minton, 2010) and foundation degrees, notes that employers have to be involved in the identification and scoping of the curriculum, including the identification of relevant professional or industry benchmarks that can be aligned to the curriculum.

*'Programme design needs to be done in partnership between the employer and HEI to ensure the content is what is required by the employer and that it is of an appropriate HE level and meets the needs of external bodies where appropriate.'*

*'Personally, from experience, I think it is very important that there is a coherent perspective to a programme of study that is led by the employer. This has been achieved through the employer identifying what roles they wish their member of staff to undertake on completion of their programme of study. This is identified through job descriptions, which then link to content and competency-based practice. This approach allows the student and employer to see clear progression.'*

*'My feelings are that this approach differs to other forms of work-based learning where the student identifies the learning that they would like to undertake and the modules that they feel would be appropriate to study.'*

(QAA, 2010, para 76)

Academic staff are involved in the articulation of the agreed curriculum and aligning it to HE standards, together with shaping the assessment so that it is relevant and rigorous as well as founded in real work activity (Boud and Solomon, 2001).

Our experience – from working with companies ranging in size from large multinational companies to SMEs – suggests that, in each case, contextualisation of the curriculum within the workplace is vital for success for both learners and employers. Where the assessment is based on real work activity, this is felt to have greater impact on the organisation (Nixon, 2008). Furthermore having a 'champion' within the workplace to whom learners can refer was found to be of great value in ensuring that potential barriers within the employer organisation could be quickly identified and overcome before they became a problem to the learners.

The titles of the awards are governed by:

- the cognate subject areas in which the learning resides;
- the employer's needs;
- the parameters of university regulations – making clear, for example, that provision is related to work in practice and is not confused with a professional qualification;
- market expectation, as the award must be appealing to students and employers, and may have the potential to gain recognition by professional bodies.

Awards are linked to the individual university's award framework. The volume of credit that entitles the students to gain an award varies by institution. The smallest volume of credit that is award bearing that we are aware of is 30 credits (Certificate of Achievement), although, within the partnership, short courses that are credit bearing are seen as an intrinsic part of the offer.

A key finding of the Higher Level Skills Pathfinder in the north-west was the importance of the links between employer engagement activity and systems within the university. The systems to support such activity should be linked into and adapted from the wider university systems, to avoid duplication of effort and ease of integrating data for reporting purposes.

When programmes have been approved and are implemented, there are key arrangements for their quality assurance that need to be considered as an integral part of the design and approval process, particularly with regard to the timing of assessment boards and associated referral and deferral processes. We also need to consider how the external examining arrangements are co-ordinated.

Most of the partner institutions offer a pattern of assessment boards that sit outside that of the normal pattern of undergraduate and postgraduate provision, since the provision may not sit within the recognised academic year. Nevertheless, it is important that students benefit from speedy and appropriate feedback on their performance after completion of each unit or module. The limitation is often when awards boards are held, as these sometimes occur only once per year.

## Practice

Staff development is essential for all involved in employer engagement activity on an ongoing basis. This will include discussion about best practice in curriculum design, assessment and quality assurance for all those involved in the employer relationship. This should be undertaken on an ongoing basis, regularly reviewing the provision to identify best practice to share across the institution and being involved in the dissemination of best practice to and from other institutions.

The locus of curriculum design varies depending upon the context:

- external imposition, where fitness to practice is entailed, drawing on the transdisciplinary nature of the working environment (Boud and Solomon, 2001);
- generic development of professional practice, designed for the individual company;
- subject-focused provision, clearly located within existing provision.

The underpinning philosophies for curriculum in all cases have synergies with characteristics described by Boud and Solomon (2001):

*...learning opportunities are not contrived for study purposes but arise from normal work ...learning tasks and work tasks are complementary...  
(the provision) meets the needs of learners, contributes to the longer-term development of the organization and is formally accredited as a university award.*

A key to successful curriculum development was considered to lie in having a lead academic to ensure that it remains fit for purpose in relation to the requirements of the employer and the standards of the university. This is confirmed by the CIHE/Exeter study (Bolden et al., 2009).

Each institution within the partnership reported that due consideration should be given to relevant external reference points (National Occupational Standards; professional statutory bodies; QAA benchmark statements). They noted that these were an integral part of the approval of any programme – as with more traditional or conventional provision – to ensure academic consistency and to facilitate the assimilation of academic practices and administration procedures. It was also recognised that the reference points can aid accreditation processes with professional institutions. It was felt that the location of provision within the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), by the ascription of credit and level, was fundamental to ensuring that the provision was clearly characterised as higher education, and thus distinguished from other training providers. Partners endeavoured to embed within provision either framework or programme learning outcomes.

The partners recognise that the QAA benchmark statements do not intend to prescribe the content of the curriculum, but to provide a sound basis on which to ‘hang’ key areas of study. These are the realm of the academic and it is important that those involved in the discussion with employers are able to explain the need to harmonise provision with these key requirements and HE characteristics.

Some partners reported that the use of credit level descriptors (e.g. Moon, 2002; Durrant et al., 2009) leads to greater consistency in approach to learning outcomes and standards of short course provision, thus ensuring that there is parity with other provision within the university and other negotiated WBL programmes across the country.

It is important to consider the needs of the non-academic members of the team, such as business development managers, or marketing and operations staff, who may often be the first point of call for employers. Staff development for employers is equally

important to ensure that they understand the requirements for facilitating learning in HE.

A community of practice in negotiated WBL could usefully be developed (within the institution and nationally) and maintained, to exchange ideas on best practice, encourage innovation and share issues posed by the flexibility and innovation of the provision.

## Conclusion

When developing employer-responsive provision, consideration needs to be given to the three 'P's model in the following contexts:

- institutional approaches;
- curriculum development;
- approvals mechanisms;
- QA arrangements for implementation.

By considering each of the aspects and the people, the principles and the practice used to address the needs of the employer client, the institution can be sure that they are:

- considering and proactively developing a response to employers that is based within the principles and concepts of higher education;
- adhering to quality and standards;
- developing provision with business in mind, making it responsive, robust and fit for purpose.

If higher education institutions are to meet the challenges of Leitch and the current economic climate, developing appropriate and responsive employer-engaged provision is key. Universities cannot expect employers to work within academic timescales to meet identified need. Indeed universities may find that they benefit from reviewing their general processes to ensure that they are efficient and effective, by using and adopting the practice developed in the negotiated work-based learning areas of the sector for its general provision.

Additionally, by working more closely with business to develop programmes, universities find additional benefits in the form of experts in the field who can inform and enhance the context and employability skills of their full-time students, or offer opportunities for work placement, knowledge transfer partnerships and research opportunities.

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### Stretching Diploma transition and progression: working collaboratively to enhance 14-19 learner progression opportunities

Stella Jones-Devitt (Teesside University), Jill Wickham (York St John University) and Andy Leach (Learning City York)

This case study highlights work developed to offer effective transition routes for Diploma in Society, Health and Development (SHD) Advanced Level (Level 3) learners aged 14-19 in England in conjunction with Skills for Health (Sector Skills Council) and the Higher York Lifelong Learning Network (a partnership of Askham Bryan College, City of York Council, the University of York, York College, York St John University and Learning City York). A Level 3/4 'Transitions module' (also known as a 'stretch unit' in Diploma parlance) was devised to provide a curriculum offering appropriate challenge and opportunity for learners to enhance skills, knowledge and understanding for successful transition from the Diploma in SHD or equivalent precursor curriculum; whether into higher education, the workplace or another learning environment. This study plots the journey of staff and learners undertaking this module and considers:

- supposed need;
- the Transitions curriculum;
- potential relevance and transferability of the Transitions module to other Diplomas and Level 3/4 provision;
- challenges and lessons learned from the process;

- significance of integrating progression and transition routes within existing higher education academic infrastructure rather than in addition;
- significant aspects achieved despite some barriers and further emerging issues for enhancement.

### Identifying the need for a transitions module

The lead author was invited to join the Diploma in SHD Expert Panel by Skills for Health in order to review existing materials and to help develop additional applied learning resources. From interrogation of the materials, it became apparent that there was opportunity to enhance provision by exploring further learning to prepare Level 3 learners for transition into higher education or the workplace. Hence, a task group was formed to explore transitions opportunities for the Diploma in SHD.

This initiative was funded initially by Skills for Health in conjunction with Higher York and Learning City York and all organisations were represented on the task group. Over a six-month period, the group researched and developed a Level 3/4 module to address wider progression issues. The assertions of Watson (2006), that the best form of widening participation is to get learners to the matriculation starting point, informed the overarching aim to develop a Level 3 or 4 module offering appropriate transition opportunities and scope that could be piloted via local delivery in 2009-10. Additionally, the task group began to explore potential for further national development and delivery. A pilot 'Transitions Awareness Day' was held with a Diploma in SHD learner cohort during this development period to test the approach and proposed materials.

### The Transitions curriculum

A curriculum was agreed and structured for learners in order to enhance skills, knowledge and understanding for successful transition from the Diploma, whether into higher education, the workplace or other learning environment. The structure of the Diploma in SHD offers many ways to extend and consolidate skills and expectations, yet – arguably – transitions are implicit and assumed within delivery. The Transitions module crystallises the learner experience while gaining academic credit (some potentially at Level 4 to enable Diploma learners to demonstrate capacity to engage at university level prior to entry). Building from the work of Yorke and Longden (2007) and Yorke and Knight (2004), it was envisaged that learners engaging with the module would also develop key employability skills to maximise the possibility for successful career progression within the sector. Table 1 highlights the 'Transitions Awareness Day' outline pilot event.

TABLE 1: TRANSITIONS AWARENESS DAY PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

Time	Location	Topic
10.00	IT 2 (in Fountains Learning Centre)	Introductions and overview of the day
10.15	IT 2	Internet detective <i>Interactive session to play detective with knowledge and some health 'facts'?</i>
10.45	IT 2	Information searching in higher education <i>Interactive session exploring expectations and skills</i>
11.45	Lunch	Free time to explore the campus and YSJU facilities <i>The Skills Bus may also be on campus</i>
13.00	IT 2	Writing development <i>Interactive session exploring writing skills and potential application in higher education and career development</i>
14.00	IT 2	Employability: what is it? <i>Quiz and introduction to HEA electronic employability tool</i>
14.40	Break	
15.00	IT 2	Developing support networks for higher education and the workplace <i>Case studies activity exploring expectations, assumptions and adjustments</i>
16.00	Close	

Several key points emerged from feedback of the pilot day to shape and determine the final version of the module:

- Learners for the pilot day were of very mixed ability and motivational levels.
- It appeared that some were unused to concentrating for long periods, despite an active engagement approach and a variety of staff facilitating the sessions. However, this could have been due to learning in a very different environment, which brought its own competing tensions.
- Student mentors/ambassadors could be used in the Transitions module to help manage expectations and to help bridge differences of age, maturity and learning experiences.
- Effective information, advice and guidance (IAG) is very important if the module is to be a worthwhile choice for learners.
- University and Diploma delivery staff need to work closely to manage expectations, including those of the staff, but particularly concerning expectations of learners.
- Learners expressed a need for the module to take place within a university environment.

The final version comprised a module that offered: “To provide learners with the tools and skills of self-analysis to enable effective professional and academic development planning in the chosen sector and/or practice area” (Module Handbook).

Learning outcomes for the module at Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) Level 3/higher education (HE) Level 0 (threshold for HE achievement) included to:

- identify key employability tools, benchmarks and standards;
- explore appropriate occupational roles in relation to employability statements;
- compile an evidence base in the form of toolkit to be utilised in the module and as a starting point for lifelong learning;
- investigate expectations for inclusion in an academic and/or workplace setting;
- consider strategies for support, coping and adjustment in transition;
- develop critical thinking skills for higher/further education and the workplace.

Learning outcomes for the module at QCF Level 4/HE Level 1 (Typical HE undergraduate Year 1 achievement) covered the same content base, but expected demonstrably higher levels of analysis:

- critique key employability tools, benchmarks and standards;

- contextualise appropriate occupational roles in relation to employability statements;
- evaluate an evidence base in the form of a toolkit to be utilised in the module and as a starting point for lifelong learning;
- appraise expectations for inclusion in an academic and/or workplace setting;
- analyse strategies for support, coping and adjustment in transition;
- enhance critical thinking skills for higher/further education and the workplace.

The module is structured over a 15-week period (including a pre-session IAG meeting and final study week) and is assessed summatively by a Transitions Development Plan equivalent to 4,000 words. (This is a personal toolkit for transition, constructed by the learner as a compilation of relevant skills and a record of achievements for the transition route alongside further development needs, which have to address all learning outcomes at the appropriate level). Progress towards level of assessment is supported by a diagnostic process of systematic reviewing of personal learning logs with decisions regarding levels of assessment finalised by Week 7.

Table 2 details the weekly timetable of activities in the Module Handbook.

**TABLE 2: MODULE TIMETABLE AND ACTIVITIES ANALYSIS**

Session	Collective activity: 30 minutes	Group tasks: 60 minutes	Collective feedback: 30 minutes	Supported independent study briefing: 15 minutes
ONE Room: De Grey (DG) 014  13.45 to 16.00	<p><b>Introduction to the module and rules of engagement!</b></p> <p>Concept of 'learning logs' and gathering evidence</p> <p>Introduction to the assessment</p>	<p>Finding your way round the YSJU campus</p> <p>Identifying personal expectations</p>	<p>Consider expectations of the module, agreed rules and plans for the future</p> <p>Discussion of tasks set from pre-session</p>	<p>Complete checklist relating to 'fitting in' theme</p> <p>Investigate potential solutions for priority aspects</p>
TWO Room: DG102  13.45 to 16.00	<p><b>What 'learning' means in HE</b></p> <p>An introduction to critical thinking</p>	<p>Learning styles exercise considering assumptions made about entrants to HE</p>	<p>Discussion of key findings and expectations</p>	<p>Complete internet detective task</p> <p>Explore effective interview techniques and devise a job description based on key transferable skills</p>

**TABLE 2: MODULE TIMETABLE AND ACTIVITIES ANALYSIS**

Session	Collective activity: 30 minutes	Group tasks: 60 minutes	Collective feedback: 30 minutes	Supported independent study briefing: 15 minutes
THREE Room: DG016  13.45 to 16.00	<b>What is employability?</b>  Quiz and exploration of key attributes employers need	Interview panel activity  Devise questions and process	Interview process: Who gets the job?	Complete designated research task: which study is real?
FOUR Room: FT (Fountains) 112  13.45 to 16.00	<b>Information searching in higher education</b>  Skills and types of evidence	Finding and prioritising evidence and appraisal techniques	Discussion of how and where you obtain knowledge	Explore student and institutional expectations for proposed progression route choice(s)
FIVE Room: DG016  13.45 to 16.00	<b>Academic transition</b>  Key elements and expectations	Managing your expectations and those expected of the HE 'student'	Personalising your toolkit for academic transition	Complete self- assessment writing development activity
SIX Room: DG016  13.45 to 16.00	<b>Writing development</b>  Writing skills and application in HE and in career development	Practical writing activity	Key issues and discussion of differences between writing for HE and writing to enhance career prospects	Consider concepts of critical thinking  Complete self- assessment rating of toolkit
SEVEN Room: SK (Skell) 222  13.45 to 16.00	<b>Transitions development seminar</b>  Plan and toolkit development	Diagnostic review of personal learning logs	Choosing the right level of assessment	Explore professional and/or organisational expectations for proposed career development choice(s)

Session	Collective activity: 30 minutes	Group tasks: 60 minutes	Collective feedback: 30 minutes	Supported independent study briefing: 15 minutes
EIGHT Room: DG016  13.45 to 16.00	<b>Applications and admissions processes</b>  Requirements for HE	Developing a good application and forward planning	Discussion of the dos and don'ts of the HE admission process	Compile a CV for chosen employment area
NINE Room: DG016  13.45 to 16.00	<b>Workplace transition</b>  Key elements and expectations	Managing your expectations and those expected of the 'employee'	Reflect upon CV feedback  Revisit evaluation of present employability skills	Personalising your toolkit for workplace transition
TEN Room: DG016  13.45 to 16.00	<b>Developing social support networks</b>  Transition into HE and the workplace	Analysing good practice guides and induction materials	Compile a list of key aspects for social support	Personal skills audit of coping and adjustment techniques
ELEVEN Room: DG016  13.45 to 16.00	<b>Assessment clinic</b>	Enhancing your Transitions Development Plan and personal toolkit	Diagnostic review of personal learning logs	Reappraising your toolkit evidence  Identify common drop- out factors for HE
TWELVE Room: DG016  13.45 to 16.00	<b>Vulnerability factors</b>  Self and structural when progressing to HE	Developing strategies to address vulnerability	Group feedback to identify practical solutions to address common vulnerability factors	Self-assessment of perceived vulnerability and development of personalised action plan to include in toolkit  Exploring budget and time management techniques
THIRTEEN Room: DG016  13.45 to 16.00	<b>Strategies for coping and adjustment</b>  Module evaluation and final assessment briefing	Identifying relevant support systems in HE and the workplace	Reflection on priorities and baseline evaluation of present skills	Reappraising personal Transitions Development Plan and toolkit evidence in light of new information

### Relevance and transferability?

The curriculum was developed for the Diploma in SHD; however, learning outcomes were written so that the transition process could be applied across many subject areas. The significance of having a module that is part of an integrated award and achievement process means that ideally learners do not have to do something additional – outside of their scheduled studies and envisaged credit tariff – to arrive at the same starting point referred to by Watson (2006) above. Longer-term, the authors argue that the transitions process should be placed within the core Diploma curriculum to assist in developing greater engagement from learners, and this is something being explored at present.

### Challenges and lessons learned

- The development process required resilience to:
  - a) get the curriculum through higher education quality systems unused to dealing with levels of flexibility and agility required for a process not explicitly recognised as higher education's business;
  - b) negotiate and reconcile occasionally conflicting quality assurance and enhancement systems of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) respectively;
  - c) recognise that effective delivery opportunities require stealthy approaches to the real – often hidden – costs of supporting and enabling a different type of learner experience;
  - d) influence hearts and minds at many levels without a major change management process built alongside module development and implementation.
- It necessitates careful selection and/or recruitment techniques; hence, holding a taster day and IAG pre-session is absolutely crucial. (NB 'selection' in this context refers to potential ability to benefit and levels of motivation). The module attempted to provide a 'lived experience' of what it is really like to be a first-year undergraduate student with a set of matching expectations around future academic and employment careers. It is imperative that learners are given the fullest information as part of an informed consent process.
- The language of higher education is used as part of the process: hence, learners become 'students'; 'units' become 'modules'; independent 'self-directed' study is assumed. This adherence to authenticity brings its own problems of adjustment and much of the time was – literally – lost in translation.



- Time needs to be allocated for staff development purposes prior to module delivery. Higher education staff have to adjust their learning approach and expectations in accordance with different levels of emotional maturity and world views of the average, highly peer-pressured, 17-year-old: quite a shock for the uninitiated! Likewise, Diploma delivery staff need to feel comfortable with using a reduced-dependency model of learner engagement, commonplace in higher education.
- It is essential to learn how to 'resist' resistance and self-doubt. Attitudes towards the Turner Prize-winning lightbulb installation spring to mind: many have commented that the Diploma has received a sceptical press; furthermore, occasional views were expressed implying that 'anyone could have done this': greeted by the riposte 'but nobody has yet'.
- There appears to be a time lag concerning perceived impact, which needs to be factored into longer-term evaluative approaches. Learner feedback from the initial taster day indicated that while participants enjoyed being on the campus, they had not necessarily enjoyed nor engaged fully with the sessions. Indeed, group feedback indicated that some learners felt the taster day had actively deterred them from considering higher education; yet, subsequent outcomes did not uphold this explicitly stated group perspective as:
  - a) more than expected applied for higher education, with many applying to the same place from which they were apparently 'deterred'. Interestingly, of the 18 students that attended the initial taster day, 13 have now applied for university courses – as opposed to only five who said they would do so at the time – and all have applied in fields of study related to the SHD sector. Two other students are taking a gap year prior to applying next year and two are looking for employment in the sector, while one student dropped out completely;
  - b) a proportion of the group, when questioned individually, indicated they had got a considerable amount from the process and had been in further contact with higher education delivery staff.

The local Diploma delivery staff indicate that this is consistent with a perceived collective lack of confidence displayed in some learners at an early stage of the Advanced Diploma which changes positively alongside broader learner development. Interim feedback from the learners who have almost completed the Transitions module indicates similar outcomes, especially in relation to difficulties in making connections across the

delivered topics and regarding assessment anxiety.

Integrating progression and transition within existing HE academic infrastructure  
Despite the difficulties of navigating the Transitions module through university quality assurance systems, its visibility has already had an impact concerning:

- where the module ‘belongs’, i.e. to which programme it feeds into, if any. NB when the module was first developed it was placed within a recognised and agreed progression pathway that guarantees successful learners a route on to various undergraduate health studies programmes through the Higher York Lifelong Learning Network;
- how learners’ achievements will be recorded on the university system if not registered as York St John University (YSJU) students and with no allocated Additional Student Number (ASN) HEFCE funding;
- raising awareness of university admissions processes, including how YSJU awarded credits will be treated if these learners apply at a later time to programmes at YSJU; how portable such HE credits will be at other universities; how official YSJU transcripts will be produced for (technically) non-YSJU students.

### Significant aspects and achievements

- The initiative utilises tools for self-analysis and management of expectations, theoretically within a ‘safe space’ for learners, who otherwise might not have the same opportunities as their A-level counterparts. (NB Many Diploma students do take additional A-levels as part of their further complement of Additional Specialist Learning options.) The module tries to address some overlooked facets of the journey of getting to the matriculation starting post that actively advantage some learners while disadvantaging others: previous experience; expectations and opportunities; material circumstances; social networks; and confidence.
- The Transitions module forms part of the Additional Specialist Learning offer, which is integrated into Year 1 of the Advanced Diploma. Hence, it is concurrent and diagnostic and not an extra leg of the journey that any ‘disadvantaged’ Diploma student must make. This contrasts with some deficit-model approaches which – while extremely useful and beneficial for many learners – still involve doing additional study rather than integrated learning.
- It is credit-rated for a higher education context and offers two levels of attainment, with the Level 4 outcomes being consistent with recognised higher education QAA

descriptors; it is also linked to employability facets in preparedness for workplace contexts.

- Robust partnerships across a range of sectors and organisations have been developed. Spin-offs include transdisciplinary skills enhancement as an essential part of the process; a vastly increased network of opportunities for further collaborative working; development of a much richer curriculum due to partners' input; much greater opportunity for Diploma in SHD learners to capitalise effectively on future progression and transition routes.

### Emerging issues:

- the future of this module – or similar – as part of the longer-term Diploma infrastructure;
- whether transitions opportunities can be achieved more efficiently and effectively by other means;
- whether the university environment is the safest space for learner transition;
- how to engage higher education in wider transdisciplinary partnership approaches in adapting its systems, curriculum and nomenclature to become more accessible to Diploma entrants;
- resourcing issues for module enhancement, required for building capacity that goes beyond relying on immense goodwill, i.e. funding and training Year 1 undergraduates and young workers to act as learner mentors; funding and commissioning Diploma students to make future learning resources and delivery more relevant for peers; engaging more employers to get involved in workplace-related delivery;
- consideration of a longitudinal evaluation process that tracks the learners' overall experience of the module and subsequent progress at Diploma completion and beyond and the use of control-group comparators.

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## Wrapper modules: a reusable curriculum approach to recognise and enhance learning in the workplace

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### Introduction

In 2008 Harper Adams University College together with the Royal Agricultural College received Higher Education Funding Council for England support to lead the development of work-based learning provision across the rural sector. The project, known as REEDNet (Rural Employer Engagement Network), set out to expand accredited provision by 450 full-time equivalent, employer co-funded student places over the three-year life of the project. Both lead institutions undertook development of their infrastructure to support the increased employer engagement activity; for example by setting up appropriate validation processes, establishing a joint-working culture and developing a financial model for this activity (for a full explanation of REEDNet see Arnold, Warr and Newlyn, 2010). A further, ongoing challenge to enable the growth of employer-responsive provision lies in the creation of appropriate and robust curricula. This chapter outlines one specific approach that has been designed and used as a means of providing an agile and responsive curriculum to support employer engagement, particularly for employers who have some existing internal provision that is significant but may not in itself meet the standards required for validation within higher education.

### The curriculum challenge

Through Harper Adams' engagement with the rural business community it became clear that there was, and is, a vast amount of high quality training and effective learning already in place across the rural sector, as is also known to be the case in other sectors. Where high quality training is already in place the higher education institution's employer engagement focuses upon recognising, extending and enhancing provision. There are a number of ways in which existing training can be enhanced, for example through the addition of more technical or industry-specific learning or by the inclusion of appropriate theoretical engagement.

The challenge of enhancing and accrediting provision has, in REEDNet's experience so far, been characterised by three additional factors.

### 1. The challenge of scale

Provision is often required for small numbers of students (in absolute terms or in full-time equivalent value). Individual engagements have needed to be designed to be viable for the small student numbers offered up by individual organisations. The small numbers are in part the result of the large number of micro businesses as well as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the rural economy, but also are the result of demand for focused training from within larger organisations e.g. focused upon a small specialist group of staff.

The challenge of scale is not unique to the experience of REEDNet. A number of recent HEFCE-funded projects are specifically targeted at working with SMEs: the University of Bedfordshire is actively seeking to find ways of opening up employer engagement to SMEs in five specific sectors (ICT, media and creative industries, financial and business services, tourism, leisure and heritage, and manufacturing and advanced engineering) through the development of a subscription-based 'knowledge club'; the University of the Arts London hosts a project to engage SMEs within the creative industries in the design and delivery of higher education; and the KUBIS project has been set up at Kingston University to develop work-based learning opportunities for employees in the manufacturing sector through the engagement of SMEs.

### 2. The challenge of timing

The market requires a swift response to meet its needs. Waiting for extended periods for developments to come to fruition is not desirable for the business, the learner or the higher education institution. Clearly, for all parties, compromise in academic quality is an unacceptable price for rapidity. The QAA's Employer-responsive provision survey (2010) makes clear that a pressure to respond quickly to employer needs has been felt by numerous higher education institutions.

### 3. The challenge of diversity

The diversity of employers, roles and learning needs 'out there' means that aligning expertise within the higher education institution with the needs of industry is an ongoing challenge, especially in the face of rapidly changing commercial contexts (Bolden et al., 2010).

## An approach: introducing wrapper modules

Harper Adams' REEDNet team, with CETL support, set about forming curriculum responses to serve the accreditation and enhancement of existing provision in the face of the challenges outlined. One output from this process has been the, internally named, wrapper module.

Wrapper modules recognise existing training as a vehicle for further learning. Further learning occurs through a range of processes that include connecting the development of knowledge or competencies (from the existing training) to bodies of literature, exploring related current sector issues and analysing the impact of new knowledge upon practice and organisational improvement.

Wrapper modules essentially stimulate further learning that is related to existing training; essentially further learning is designed to grow from existing training and to feed back into it. The layers of the wrapper module are depicted in Figure 1.

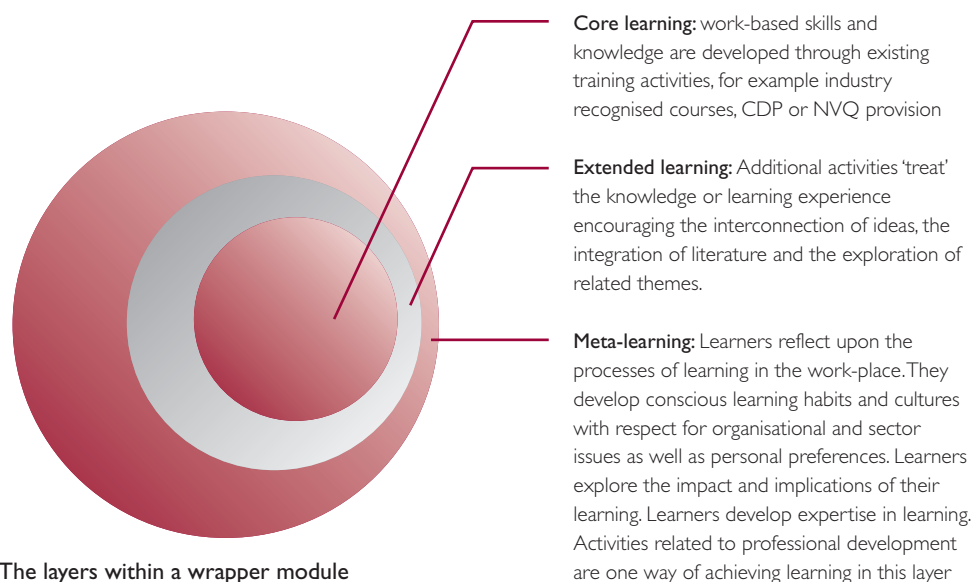


Figure 1: The layers within a wrapper module

## A critical assumption underpinning the wrapper module concept

There is an assumption implicit within the wrapper module that expertise in the workplace or within professional bodies is best placed to teach, facilitate and assess the development of very specific aspects of work-based learning. The delivery and assessment of the core learning is then, under this model, devolved to work-based experts. The role of the higher education institution in this arrangement is therefore to facilitate extended learning (as described in Figure 1) and meta-learning.

## Assessing the learning occurring within wrapper modules

To assess wrapper modules judgments need to be made by or on behalf of the higher education institution, as to whether a learner has satisfactorily demonstrated the knowledge, skills and understanding associated with the extended and meta-levels as outlined by the module's learning outcomes. Assessment of core learning remains with the workplace, the professional body or other vocational awarding body. This generates a number of potential assessment scenarios (outlined in Table 1).

Table 1: Wrapper module assessment scenarios

<p><b>Scenario a:</b> Assessment of the different layers happens discretely.</p> <p>Each layer is assessed through different a number of products, e.g. observation (core), report (extended) and PDP with a reflective commentary (meta).</p>
<p><b>Scenario b:</b> Assessment of the different layers is delivered through a linked approach.</p> <p>The employer, professional body or examination board assesses the core element. The information within this assessment is used as supporting material for the HE element. For example, an NVQ portfolio is used as an appendix to a higher education commentary and is cross-referred to add illustrations and context for the higher education element.</p>
<p><b>Scenario c:</b> Assessment of the different layers is delivered through an integrated approach.</p> <p>One assessment product is used but is assessed in two different ways. The employer, professional body or examination board assesses the core elements, while the higher education assessor considers the extended- and meta-layers of learning.</p>

## Theoretical underpinnings

The wrapper module concept was a pragmatic response to a real challenge. Kerwin et al. (2009) suggested that the higher education sector can't compete with private providers and must therefore innovate and play to its strengths. The wrapper module concept enables higher education institutions to take the role of 'experts in learning' and leaves industrial experts to underpin operational and vocational skills. The wrapper module

concept enables both industry and the higher education institution to operate through their respective strengths. The division of roles and responsibilities of the partners can be clearly established in line with expertise. Higher education institutions are responsible for extended and meta-learning and are then not responsible for, or directly dependent upon, quality assurance of the core element. Learning outcomes for wrapper modules are designed such that that no claim is made for the achievement of specific technical competences or vocational aspects; claims are made regarding the learner's ability to, for example, connect ideas, synthesise, critically evaluate, analyse and illustrate concepts.

Lyons and Buckley (2009) adapt Barnett and Coates' (2005) conceptualisation of the professional curriculum and identify three domains of learning in the context of work: the 'practice' domain, 'subject knowledge' domain and the 'self' domain. Completeness, it is suggested, comes from addressing all three domains. The three layers of the wrapper module can be seen to correspond to these domains. The maximisation of overlap of the layers would, it is proposed, depend upon the level of integration of the layers within both the assessment strategy and within the learning and teaching strategy used in delivery. Figure 2 transposes the wrapper module concept on to Lyons and Buckley's model of curriculum (2009); the perceived benefits of the student experience for each possibility are annotated.

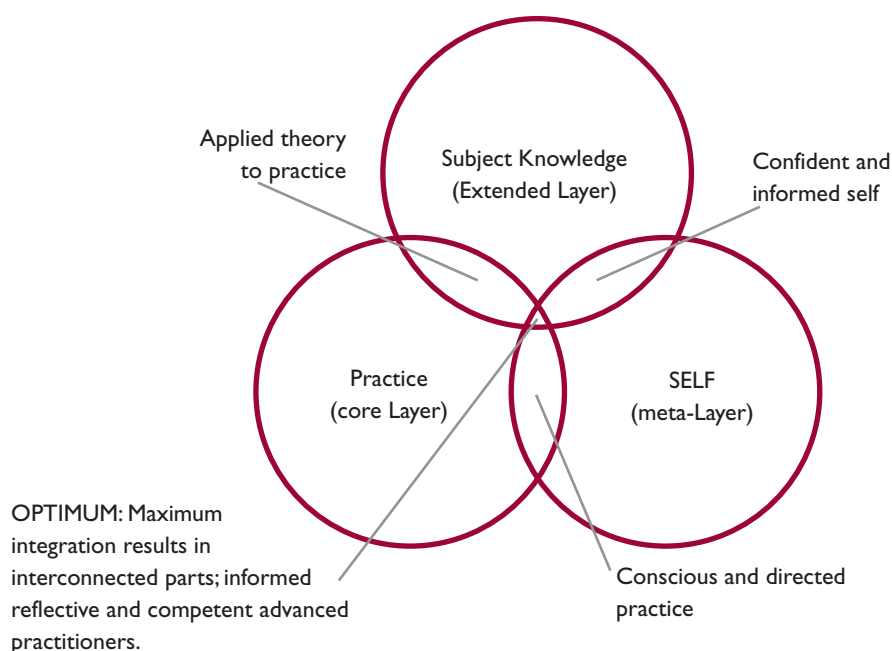


Figure 2: The domains of curriculum associated with wrapper modules (adapted from Lyons and Buckley, 2009)



Meta-learning, according to Biggs (1985), is a learner's awareness of their own learning, which in-turn facilitates their taking control of the learning process. Meta-learning is useful to enable and empower learners to learn, which is particularly important against the backdrop of a rapidly changing knowledge economy (Arnold and Thompson, 2009). In order to promote meta-learning, the wrapper module would most likely draw upon elements of personal and professional development planning. Such activities act as a mechanism to support an enhanced awareness of self, professional needs, professional context and learning consciousness. Activities may comprise: designing and undertaking skills audits, analysing learning preferences, assessing sector skills needs, assessing organisational needs, critically experiencing and analysing a range of learning experiences, maintaining a learning journal and systematically reflecting upon learning experiences.

The use of personal and professional development planning as a mechanism to promote meta-learning has an added value: the consideration of learning approaches can generate improvements in personal strategies for core learning, which can be immediately put into action.

Wrapper modules also borrow from the domain of inquiry-based learning. To extend the learning undertaken in the core element learners may undertake investigative activities. For example, they might:

- systematically evaluate the impact of their new knowledge upon practice;
- identify and research current issues in legislation, technological change or consumer trends, to which their core learning relates;
- critically compare their practice with other examples of 'best practice' as uncovered through engagement with a professional community and through literature;
- undertake an action research project based on new techniques revealed to them in the core learning element.

The facility for employers and learners to select the exact themes of inquiry ensures that learning is current, relevant and authentic.

### Case study of wrapper modules in action: an NVQ core

In 2009 a private training provider sought to develop a higher education award (Certificate of Higher Education) based around existing leadership and management training being delivered to learners at Level 4 through an NVQ. While the level was

undoubtedly at Level 4, the breadth of knowledge, skills and understanding within the existing provision was not deemed sufficient to meet the award outcomes for the proposed certificate.

As an added dimension to this scenario, the higher education institution did not have in-house direct match expertise to reflect the setting in which the individuals were working (care sector), although the University College did have generic leadership and management expertise.

Development work was undertaken to form provision that included the Level 4 NVQ learning but which extended this through additional activities and did take the institution outside of their own zone of expertise (i.e. in assessing care based students).

The wrapper module concept was applied such that the accredited learning experience (and associated outcomes) sought to:

- promote engagement with professional information sources;
- deepen and extend the learning generated from the core learning activity;
- facilitate professional awareness, career planning and learning evaluation.

Some learning outcomes for the modules from this case study are illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Examples of learning outcomes from the wrapper modules cited in this case**

By the end of these modules learners must be able to:

1. Evaluate their existing skills against the requirements of their job role and identify workplace competencies for development.
2. Illustrate and describe the achievement of a range of relevant workplace competencies.
3. Describe the value of their acquired competencies to their organisation.
4. Identify improvements to their personal professional practice resulting from the development of new knowledge.
5. Relate specific examples of their learning gains to current sector issues.
6. Discuss their engagement with a range of professional information sources.
7. Compare a workplace experience to current and relevant professional literature.
8. Produce or update their personal development plan.

Within this collation of learning outcomes the opportunity to illustrate workplace learning is undoubtedly extensive. Yet the assessment (projected by the learning outcomes) is not focused on the content of that very specific workplace knowledge and understanding, for that is assessed by other means, in this case via an NVQ assessment. For the higher education institution's purposes, the focus rather is upon the presence of information skills, the connection of learning to literature, the interconnection of ideas and the development of learning awareness. Assessment of the higher level element can be seen to focus upon the extended learning and the development of meta-learning and extended learning (refer to Figure 1).

Regarding quality assurance, the higher education institution remains satisfied that skills being developed at work, for work, are being scrutinised by existing systems, organisations and communities of practice. The higher education institution retains a clear remit to assess and quality assure the learning occurring via the additional learning experiences, as is articulated through the 'wrapper' learning outcomes. This division of responsibility is reflected in award name (Certificate in Higher Education in Professional Studies). Award names for this form of learning need to reflect that which has been assessed, perhaps with some contextual descriptors (as a suffix).

### Possible uses

The wrapper module concept is flexible in that it can be used to recognise and extend a range of training and learning at any academic level. Wrappers can be used to recognise and extend the learning associated with:

- in-house training;
- NVQs or other existing vocational qualifications;
- experiential learning;
- awards made by professional bodies.

A single wrapper module may be used in a variety of situations: the core learning would be variable, the themes and issues addressed would be variable, but the learning processes and level would be fixed.

## Advantages

The wrapper module concept offers a swift, yet robust, response to employer requirements; because learning is articulated in generic terms within the module documentation one wrapper module can be transferred to multiple situations. These modules have 'shell' characteristics. The modules are essentially reusable objects, as are resources and assessment approaches. Once the principles are accepted the modules are easily adaptable in relation to credit volume and level.

The focus of the higher education institution upon the extended learning and the meta-learning means that the need to use university staff with a tight expertise fit to each and every employer's need is redefined: while some expertise in the related field is required to make sense of the material presented, the institution assumes the role of assessing learning processes and levels; responsibility for the highly specific work-based learning is delegated to the experts in the field. The distribution of expertise in this way enables higher education institutions to engage with a more diverse spectrum of employers, professional bodies and private training providers. The devolution of core learning to the workplace, coupled with the facility for employers and learners to select issues for consideration within the extended layer of the module, enables learning to remain up to date.

For learners and employers, knowledge and skills can be further developed in a way that respects the expertise in existence within the workplace and corresponding communities of practice. The higher education institution facilitates further learning without prescribing the curriculum. In addition the use of wrapper modules enables learning to keep pace with industrial, technological, legal or political changes enabling content at the point of learning to be adapted in the face of changes.

## Conclusion

The wrapper module concept is a reusable curriculum tool that enables flexible content and high degrees of relevance for employers and learners, and places the higher education institution in the position of being a 'guide by the side' facilitator of work-based learning rather than as a 'sage on the stage' style content provider. The wrapper module design facilitates the formation of transdisciplinary, relevant, co-created knowledge that is both fit for practice and academically robust.

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## Widening participation from the workplace: designing small awards that are employer and employee responsive

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### Introduction

Much of the emphasis in current widening participation policies has been on the traditional student, who is young and enters university to take a full-time degree straight from school or college. However, the Government points to the fact that “around three-quarters of the 2020 workforce have already left compulsory education” (DIUS, 2008, p. 6) and acknowledges that current policies overlook the needs of many potential learners who are already in the workplace and who could not/would not consider full-time higher education. The ability to recognise learning in the workplace, and to develop small employer-responsive awards, offers such learners the opportunity to engage with higher education at the same time as they undertake required professional development. For many work-based learners the ability to assess experiential learning in the workplace for higher education awards is “a liberator for [those for] whom first chance education had not delivered success” (Braham and Pickering, 2007, p. 45). They have the opportunity to develop graduate skills and enhance their qualifications without having to sacrifice their employment.

### What sort of learning do employers want?

The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and the national credit framework have facilitated the integration of a much broader range of learning into academic awards. Through its focus on the generic characteristics and outcomes of higher education, the credit framework provides a method of ‘evaluating’ learning that is context independent, and can therefore be used to consider learning that takes place both inside and outside the university. Credit levels descriptors can provide academic staff with guidance on the characteristics of workplace learning that can be appropriately recognised by higher education. They provide an indication of the elements of learning that must be present in order for a learning experience to be demanding enough to ‘count’ as equivalent to higher level study. This is an important element in ensuring that developmental learning takes place when addressing the three party knowledge interests

that are involved in workplace learning: those of the learner, the employer and the university. Evans, when writing about the role of experience-based learning in allowing employees to gain academic awards from workplace learning, outlines the respective demands of the parties involved:

*The employer needs to be clear on what it is he/she wants the employee to learn. The employee needs to be convinced that the new learning will create possible openings for career advancement and/or further qualifications. And the academic needs to be sure that the programme of learning proposed is at an acceptable level for higher education and that procedures will ensure that academic standards are preserved. (Conradi, Evans and Valk, 2006, p. 139)*

All these interests need to be fully recognised and addressed in programme design, regardless of the size of the award. There are clear indications that, while employers are frequently interested in either small volumes of academic credit or small academic awards, learners often value the opportunity to access more established awards such as degrees. The challenge for the university when designing small employer-responsive awards (i.e. those that can fall within the higher education framework but are not 'large' recognised awards such as degrees) is to accommodate both employers' and learners' interests.

### University responses to employer needs

The employer who is commissioning the programme will have particular organisational needs in mind when they come to the university, and may have a view on how these will best be fulfilled. However, it is important that staff from the university work closely with staff in the organisation to get a clear view of precisely what organisational outcomes are envisaged so that they can design a programme that will achieve these. This is fundamental to successful programme design, in that during the programme planning meetings the proposed shape of the programme often changes as people become more familiar both with the requirements of the university and also with the potential of its flexible provision. In addition, frequent interaction supports "the process of trust-building [which] is itself seen as integral to the broader process of negotiating the inevitable ambiguity and complexity of co-working" (Lucas et al., 2007, p. 60). Employer-responsive programmes are co-designed, in that the content is negotiated, and this involves academic staff becoming familiar with a different organisational culture and

mode of communication.

There is no single definition of 'small' when referring to small awards, but these can vary in size from small volumes of credit (five to ten credits) to certificates of 60 credits – these are the awards generally covered by the term 'bite-sized' to indicate that they involve volumes of learning that are small in comparison to full higher education awards, such as Bachelors or Masters degrees. Employer-responsive small awards take a different shape to those available in the university, both in relation to content and delivery due to the inclusion of assessed work-based learning. Therefore staff involved in programme design need skills relating to the design and delivery of work-based learning in addition to any specific subject expertise. Boud and Tennant (2006) define these as, "skill in learning consultancy, understanding the relationships between work and context, appreciation of transdisciplinarity, facility in fostering enquiry, and knowledge of reflexivity and review". Such skills are needed because work-based learning programmes take a particular pedagogic approach, and these capabilities support the design and delivery of programmes that build on experiences in the workplace, while at the same time addressing the academic requirements of the university.

### Balancing subject-specific and generic learning

The balance between subject expertise and more general work-based learning expertise will depend on the nature of the programme involved. If there is a requirement for delivery of specific subject content or the development of a particular professional practice, then knowledge of the particular subject is important. However, many work-based learning programmes are structured to support the development of more generic professional skills and abilities, and here work-based learning expertise is fundamental in ensuring the appropriate academic translation of work-based activities. Programmes with generic outcomes can accommodate a wide variety of workplace practice, while at the same time demonstrating high levels of achievement. However, even in situations where specific content may be required, small awards tailored to an employer's requirements will not achieve the breadth of subject coverage that is felt appropriate on programmes within the institution. It is therefore necessary to recognise the constraints imposed by a small volume of learning. The flexibility inherent in an employer-responsive approach allows for the fact that "many students tend to concentrate on a very narrow area of study much more akin to what a post graduate might do when writing a dissertation or thesis on a particular problem or issue" (Graves, 1993). However, not all colleagues are comfortable accommodating such constraints, and it has been argued that,



“a hybrid member of staff with wider experience of life and the commercial/political worlds is definitely most likely to build relationships with employers” (Helyer, 2007, p. 75)

It is important, when designing programmes that integrate experience-based learning from the workplace, to remember that, “Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other” (Dewey, 1997). The fundamental principle involved here is that the university is awarding recognition not to workplace experience per se, but to the learning that has taken place as a result of that experience – working and learning can take place at the same time, but they are not the same thing. Successful completion of appropriate assessment is needed to demonstrate that learning has taken place. Appropriate assessment can take a number of forms, but will include what Biggs terms “performance assessment” (2003), which involves more than being able to do something. It requires the demonstration of conscious competence through the provision of an explicit rationale for activities undertaken, for example through presentations, demonstrations or artefacts with accompanying commentary, critical incident analysis, etc. An important aspect of work-based learning programmes is the requirement for the clear demonstration of reflection on practice. There are indications that, even in small awards, reflection can prove powerful as a professional development practice, in addition to providing a resource for organisational learning by offering detailed insights into organisational practice and processes.

### The role of reflection in learning at work

Reflection on practice has been integrated into the pedagogy of many workplace learning programmes and is widely perceived to be an important element in ensuring that work-based learning provides developmental learning. The advantage of such an approach is that it provides a way in which learners can be supported in structuring their workplace experience to identify their learning from that experience. Reflection on practice offers a flexible response to workplace learning, in that it focuses on process rather than specific subject content, and it can therefore accommodate a broad range of different workplace practice. However, it is a complex process many learners do not find easy, and facilitating learners’ reflection requires a sophisticated pedagogy. The structuring of experience via reflection means that delegates are required to analyse their own practice to identify which elements of it actively contribute to their learning. It is extremely challenging to use one’s own context as the focus for analysis and evaluation, but such a process does ensure that developmental learning takes place.

An important part of the approach taken during the systematic reflection that is a required part of work-based learning is what Mason terms the “discipline of noticing”, and, as he points out, “For noticing part of me needs to be doing and part of me needs to be observing” (2002, p. 120). Although ‘noticing’ sounds a relatively easy thing to do, systematic and active noticing of the type required for active reflection demands a high level of discipline from the learner. The process requires the development of meta-cognitive skill – a skill rarely discussed in the workplace but that professionals need if they are to accurately evaluate their own performance and development.

### Facilitating experience-based learning

The process of facilitating experience-based learning for workplace learners is quite different to that for delivering a series of lectures/seminars (see Walsh, 2007). Referring to learner-managed learning in the workplace, Laycock claims that there needs to be a shift from “didactic to facilitative teaching from dependent to autonomous study, from transmission to interpretation, from the authoritarian to the democratic” (1993, p. 24). This change in perspective from the didactic to the facilitative is particularly important in the context of mature professional adult learners whose primary identity is as ‘worker’ rather than ‘student’. It recognises that, even when they fill relatively junior roles, workplace learners are mature adults who have had a range of work and life experiences and who have developed life skills that support them in their studies. Such learners require a very different approach from academic staff to that adopted when inducting a group of relatively inexperienced 18-year-olds into an academic discipline. In such a model the relationship between the academic and the learner is much more egalitarian than that of ‘expert’ to ‘novice’, and it is important that staff/student interactions reflect this difference through recognition of the competence and expertise work-based learners bring to the university, rather than focusing solely on the academic expertise already there.

However, it is also important to remember that small tailored awards are often delivered over a short period, which means that those taking the course do not have the luxury of developing the required academic skills over time. It is, therefore, particularly important to ensure that the level of the programme is appropriate for the nature of the proposed ‘intake’. This is not entirely straightforward as often the judgement relating to ability to study at higher levels has to be made in the absence of the formal qualifications, such as A-levels/Access courses or EdExcel, which are commonly used to indicate readiness for higher education. In our experience it is possible for professionals who

have built a successful career in the workplace, but who have no previous experience of higher education, to successfully complete programmes at Level 6 of the HE credit framework. However, it is also the case that for some work-based learners it is more appropriate to design Level 4 programmes. Familiarity with the experience and roles of the proposed cohort can provide some indication of likely level of programme. It can also be extremely helpful to ensure that some sort of ‘admissions’ process is in place – for example, an interview or an entry task of some sort on which applicants can be given feedback – so that those employees choosing or required to take the programme are not set up to fail. In addition, those learners who are entirely new to higher education find formative feedback from a pre-entry written task very useful as a basis from which to gauge the required level of performance of the programme they are joining.

### Demand for employer-responsive provision

Level of demand is an important aspect of employer-responsive provision and the requirement to meet the necessary academic standards of any programme in order for academic credits to be awarded needs to be explicit from the beginning of discussions relating to programme design. If this happens then the inclusion of ‘admissions processes’ are seen as a necessary element of quality assurance, rather than an attempt to control entry or exclude. It could be argued that the FHEQ is the national standard for higher education institutions, and that this has to be met.

Small awards offered through employers can be an attractive way for people without formal higher level qualifications to access higher education; they can provide a form of ‘taster’ programme. Students taking awards ‘worth’ 60 credits and delivered over six months have told me that the shortness of the study period was appealing to them, because it meant that they did not have to commit to a long period of study but could ‘try out’ university study. In addition, successful completion of small awards can be important in affirming an individual’s capabilities – comments such as “I am more than happy at completing the course successfully and it has given me confidence that I can study at this level” (quote from email from student) are frequent.

In addition to being extremely flexible in relation to content and entry requirements, employer-responsive provision can be tailored in size: programmes designed and delivered off-site for a specific organisation do not need to meet the requirements for a standard module, because they do not have to fit in with other mainstream provision. However, it is important to consider how small volumes of credit will be used. Employers may well focus only on the small volume of learning they need to benefit their organisation, but individual learners are frequently interested to know

how they can build on the learning they have been required to undertake. A common question received from potential learners is, “When we get the credits from the programme what can we do with them?” When programmes for small awards/volumes of credit are being designed it is, therefore, useful for the university to consider how the credits can be used against existing programmes.

Effectively what will be taking place is a form of accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL), except that, whereas students who claim APCL usually bring credits from other institutions, the credits here will be ones awarded by the institution itself. It could be argued, therefore, that it is appropriate to ensure they are acceptable against at least one award at that institution.

This raises issues relating to both volume and content. If an employer programme is ‘worth’ five credits, how will learners who successfully achieve the credits be able to use them in a programme where the standard module size is 15 credits? If the content of an employer-responsive programme is subject specific but has been tailored to the employer’s needs, how can this be recognised against a named award within the institution?

### Effective facilitation and implementation

Probably the most effective way of facilitating full recognition of such programmes in relation to content is through the use of an awards framework with generic outcomes for all the modules involved. Such a framework can incorporate the recognition of both subject-specific content and work-based learning. A number of higher education institutions are actively engaging with such frameworks and using the model of work-based learning in which programme design focuses on responding directly to the needs of learners in the context of their workplace, rather than using disciplinary requirements to structure the curriculum. There is an increasing trend towards the development of Professional Studies degrees at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels; these awards are designed to recognise the transdisciplinary nature of learning based on activities in the workplace, and thus facilitate the flexible recognition of a wide range of content. In contexts where a generic framework is not appropriate because it is not consistent with the mission of the institution, it can be helpful to consider the inclusion of elective modules when designing programmes, as this introduces some flexibility in content requirements.

When designing tailored programmes that provide volumes of credit smaller than the standard module size in an institution, the issue is how to dovetail this small volume

of successful learning into a programme. The provision of additional content and assessment that provides a 'bridge' into a module can be used to support the integration of small volumes of learning. This additional learning could be made available through independent, self-managed learning via the use of a virtual learning environment so that there is no impact on mainstream delivery. The use of 'bridges' can ensure an element of consistency in content between external and internal provision.

## Conclusions

Thoughtful and effective programme design is fundamental to the full recognition of work-based learning, and acts to reconcile the tensions between responding to organisational needs while at the same time keeping learners' needs in view. In criticisms of employer-responsive provision, the established distinction between 'training' and 'education' is frequently called upon, with the former being defined as "traditionally not ...concerned with the whole person, instead relying on narrow, behaviouristic skills acquisition" (Beckett and Hager, cited in Walsh, 2008). Such a definition overlooks the emphasis on learning that is embedded in work-based learning programmes. As Helyer points out, "Learning enhances skills and builds a better more productive workforce ... However it must be remembered that learning also transforms and improves lives" (2007, p. 76). In addition, to assume that employer-responsive provision serves only the employer's purpose fails to recognise that, "An employee's wish to better themselves and even their performance at work may actually have little to do with how they feel about the company as a whole or the owner/manager" (Helyer, 2007, p. 78). Tallantyre puts the case for work-based learning clearly:

*At the level of equity and diversity, it is essential that higher education supports people who wish to continue their learning to higher levels ... in whatever context they ... find themselves. Since work dominates adult life as the main form of sustainable existence, many will inevitably make their choice in that context. Moreover, for many it is the source of both greater motivation than earlier academic experiences for which they could see less applicability, and greater support from employers than from parents whose own aspirations were limited. It has already been proven that workforce development activity is more likely to widen participation by those from lower socio-economic groups than almost any other activity. (2008, p. 5)*

From this perspective, the provision of small employer-responsive programmes based on workplace activities provides a mode of widening participation that is not present in the current emphasis on learners joining the dominant full-time model of higher education.

Moreover, the emphasis on providing a collaborative model of personal and professional education indicates quite clearly the difference between the academic structuring of experience-based learning from the workplace and employment-based training. It is a clear example of an occasion when, “The ‘connect’ with the ‘academy’ provides an intellectual context and environment for thinking and learning in the workplace, and a rigour and objectivity from which new insights, understanding and creativity can arise” (Wedgwood, 2007).

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## Small is big: some unanticipated consequences of designing an educational model for SMEs

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### Background

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) account for over half of the UK private sector turnover and employ nearly 60% of the private sector workforce (BIS, 2009). However, employees in SMEs do not, typically, have the opportunity to benefit from training and education, particularly of the kind provided by higher education institutions (HEIs) (Johnston and Loader, 2003).

The traditional HEI employer engagement business model involves providing courses for specific cohorts from large employers or recruiting part-time students from large employers, where there will be repeat business. There is an underlying financial logic here in relation to HEI's own economies of scale and the resource expended on recruiting students. SMEs are generally viewed as a much more difficult market to address, from a university perspective.

However, the importance to the UK economy of SMEs was one reason why a team at Kingston University decided to tackle this market. Another was the issue of widening participation: the 23 million individuals employed by SMEs in the UK clearly have less access to training and education than other workers, so represent a disadvantaged and largely ignored constituency.

### The KUBIS project

At Kingston we set about to address the challenge of providing education and training for SMEs by setting up, in 2007, a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded project to investigate and meet demand in this area. This project was called KUBIS (Kingston University Business Interaction with SMEs). In particular, we planned to concentrate on manufacturing SMEs. London and the south-east, the area in which Kingston University is based, generates 40% of the UK's manufacturing GDP (EEF South and SERTUC, 2006), making this sector an important one to the local economy.

### What do SMEs want?

KUBIS first investigated what kind of education and training SMEs, and organisations who speak for the SMEs in the sector, wanted for staff and business development. We were expecting the need to be in engineering training and education, but it transpired that companies felt that their staff were proficient in technical matters and that the skills gap was in the area of business process development. This was our first unanticipated finding.

We found that what companies wanted was a course that was highly tailored to the individual and the individual company, and flexible in relation to time and location, with no compulsory university attendance.

In our early discussions with manufacturing SMEs and representative organisations, the view was repeatedly expressed that HEIs tend to run programmes that are described as generic business courses, but seem to be aimed more at larger organisations and so don't have the same relevance of application for small businesses.

They gave examples of human resources modules and organisational development modules, which tend to assume a large workforce:

“Many university business courses offer subjects like Human resources, and it's hard for a learner in a company of seven or eight staff to relate what happens in their firm to that. The course needs to recognise that the scale is different for SMEs, so some of the issues are different”.

(Manufacturing Advisory Service, Greater London).

### Learning by work-based social networking

Consequently we set out to design a course that would meet the varying needs of smaller companies. After numerous iterations, checking back with our SME advisers, the course we came up with had a content and structure that looked like this:



Table 1: meeting the needs of smaller companies

### Completely tailored modules

Work-based projects by independent study: these make up 70% of course

Reflective portfolio: critical reflection on their own learning and development throughout the course

### Online taught modules

Professional development: the student focuses on where they want to go and how they are going to get there

Introduction to WBL: the student learns to design their own learning agreement

Introduction to small business development: a focus on managerial functions and organisational policy issues

Introduction to information systems: how underlying information systems support the organisation's processes

The basis of the course was a three-way learning agreement, prepared by the student, with input from their employer mentor and their University supervisor. The intention was that the course would both develop the learner and benefit the company, as the student worked through business-critical projects, receiving University input as they went along.

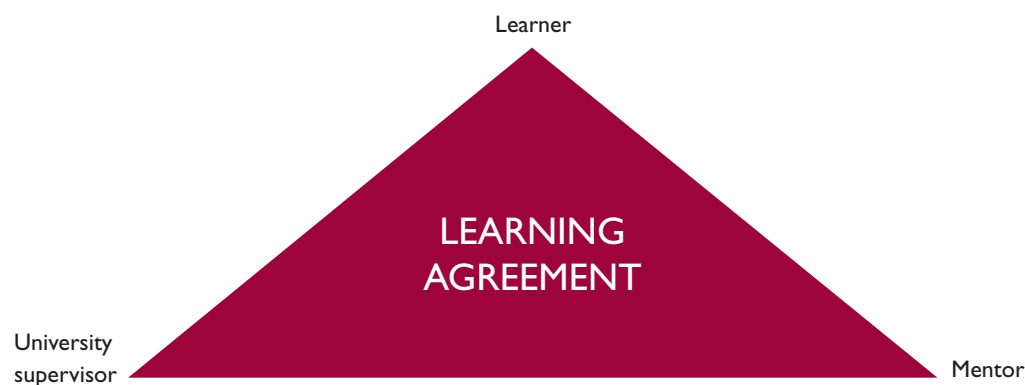


Figure 1: three way learning agreement

All support for the course was structured and delivered online using tailored social networking technologies, as shown in Figure 2. Students were encouraged to join online communities of practice within their sector, which could be regional, national or international; this meant that employers could benefit from students learning about international best practice in their sector technologies.



Figure 2: tailored social networking technology:- KubiSpace

As a result KUBIS brought together all that was best about work-based learning, and amalgamated it with contemporary approaches to online learning. We thought we were on to a winner!

### Recession bites

However, by the time the course was designed and validated, another challenge had appeared on the horizon. Recession. It hit the manufacturing sector and smaller businesses particularly hard, and many of the companies we contacted when recruiting students for the course were concentrating on financial survival, not on staff development. Even the firms who had worked with us on devising the course, and who had intended to put employees through it now felt unable to make a financial commitment to staff training. This was our second unanticipated – and this time, unwelcome – finding.

In order to mitigate the risk of being unable to recruit to the planned course, KUBIS decided to extend the offer to larger organisations, and to sectors other than manufacturing.

### It's all about (S)ME!

An interesting consequence of this extension of the offer was that some larger companies with a more contemporary approach to training were attracted to the programme. These were businesses that had a conception of employee learning that was about developing individual potential rather than training staff in a more traditional one-size-fits-all approach. One such company who felt that the underpinning pedagogy of the course dovetailed well with their own approach to staff development was Avis car rental. Avis have a national programme for fast-tracking promising staff, and the tailored Business Process Development course slotted in well with that:

“Avis will provide the framework, but we want staff to use their own initiative and we encourage self-learning and self-development”.  
(Avis UK Head of Talent, Sharon Fennell)

So as a consequence of our change of target employer, the project team realised that we'd developed an educational paradigm that was grounded in personalised, individual development, so scaleable for any organisation, although originally designed for SMEs. This was our third and final unanticipated – and much more welcome – finding.

### Conclusion

SMEs make up 99.99% of all enterprises in the UK, and the trend over the last decade has been that the number of SMEs is growing (BIS, 2009). If education and training is not made available to staff employed by these companies, the UK skills base will not grow by anything approaching the aspirations of the Leitch (2006) agenda. The KUBIS project has demonstrated that, with a little imagination, courses can be developed that take the needs of SMEs into consideration, but are also appropriate for larger companies. The potential is there, and UK HEIs have demonstrated quite clearly over the last decade that they are prepared to expand into new arenas if the economic model for student funding permits. The question is - as I write this on the eve of the 2010 general election – will our new Government provide an economic model that does permit?

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## Flexible learning for workforce modernisation in health and social care

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The West Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Network (WYLLN) has supported a number of projects aimed at developing a more employer-responsive curriculum and enhancing progression opportunities for vocational learners. One such project is the development of a Flexible Framework for Learning and Development in Health and Social Care. Over the past year the WYLLN Health, Social Care and Early Years (HSCEY) Sector Group has been working with employers who see the value of flexible learning in developing their workforce and improving services by introducing higher level skills to support workers in preparation for emerging new roles.

The project originated from open forum discussions in April 2009 with employers across health, social care and early years as part of the work of the HSCEY Sector Group, which consists of FE and HE partners, Sector Skills Councils and employers in West Yorkshire. At this event employers across the sector expressed a number of needs they felt were not being met by learning providers. They wanted:

- smaller (bite-sized) chunks of learning that were part of a cohesive accredited programme so progression pathways could be developed;
- clear transferability of skills including recognition of in-house training and previous learning so there was no need to repeat learning when staff moved organisations or directorates;
- to be able to develop learning for new roles quickly;
- for programmes of learning need to be flexible enough to accommodate ‘blurred boundary’ working in order to support integrated service delivery and the personalisation agenda, but that also allowed learners to progress in more specialised fields, in other words allowed both lateral and vertical progression.

Drawing on the outcomes of this initial consultation, Escalate, at the University of Bradford, put forward a proposal to the HSCEY Sector Group to develop a collaborative framework with generic module titles and learning outcomes for the health and social care sector, using the idea of a ‘shell’ award structure as an example of how this could be adopted across institutions. In order to assess response to this, a further consultation

event was held in September 2009 to which health and/or social care employers and senior academic staff from relevant departments in West Yorkshire universities and colleges were invited. The Sector Group allocated WYLLN funding to sponsor the event and a project to develop a framework should it attract support from institutional partners.

The initial response from HE providers was, however, rather mixed. A number felt that they were already meeting employers' demands in relation to flexible provision, or quoted institutional academic standards policy as preventing them from developing awards in this way or from working on a collaborative framework. Other bureaucratic barriers were cited such as how to assess smaller units of learning carrying five or ten credits, for example, without it becoming overburdensome for both assessor and learner. A further tension was the competition between institutions: some felt that working in a collaborative framework would, ironically, jeopardise their competitive edge in attracting employers and learners.

Of particular concern was whether flexible provision could or would be funded. FE colleges are restricted by funding regulations with only full awards attracting HEFCE funding, and for universities much of the health care provision is specified and funded by NHS education commissioners. Indeed funding was a key issue and would prove to play an important part in securing the confidence of partners involved; for this reason education commissioning and the support of the strategic health authority became crucial to the project.

Employers, on the other hand, reiterated their perception that the flexible provision they were looking for was not currently on offer from HE providers. The immediate need was primarily from the health sector, looking to develop learning for emerging Assistant Practitioner roles. The fact remained that employers felt there was still a need that was not being met, and a solution needed to be found. This has become even more important as public spending constraints have begun to take effect: employers are adamant that they are only able to fund learning that has direct relevance to the role and are increasingly unwilling to support what they see as duplication or superfluous learning in some established programmes.

So was this a question of perception on the part of the employers? Were HE providers really providing the flexibility required? Could this be an opportunity for HE to shed employer perceptions of unresponsiveness, bureaucracy and inflexibility, and show that institutions could work together in a solution-focused way, customer and learner centred, and creative in curriculum design?

A suggestion emerged that seemed to offer a way forward and bring all parties together. It was proposed that we should take a step back and review the current

landscape by conducting a detailed audit of: a) flexible learning provision in West Yorkshire for higher level skills in health and social care; and b) the needs of NHS employers in the region for learning for Assistant Practitioner roles, i.e. at Level 4/5, but keeping progression through to professional status and beyond in view as part of the long-term aim. Recommendations from this audit would then inform the development of a collaborative flexible framework for learning and development for health and social care.

Following the consultation, a full project proposal was drawn up by Escalate and the WYLLN Sector Officer, and a steering group convened involving the strategic health authority (NHS Yorkshire and the Humber), Sector Skills Councils (Skills for Health and Skills for Care), employers, and representative HE/FE members of the Sector Group. This steering group would oversee the audit and lay the foundations for building the framework. The project proposal consisted of three phases: phases 1 and 2 were the employer and institutional audits, which would be conducted concurrently, and phase 3 was the development of the framework, which would be shaped to some extent by the recommendations from phases 1 and 2.

The audit was completed over four months from December 2009 with the final report produced in March 2010. All West Yorkshire NHS trusts were contacted as were Skills for Health, Skills for Care and NHS Yorkshire and the Humber. Among employers the biggest response was from health trusts that provide services in the community, which perhaps demonstrates that there are stronger drivers within this area of work to review skills mix in relation to integrated service delivery and personalisation. Hospital trusts seemed less able to respond at this point in time – they appeared still to be deliberating over strategy and implications of developing this section of the workforce, although drivers in relation to efficiency savings and QIPP (Quality, Innovation, Productivity and Prevention) were working their way quickly up the agenda. Overall there appeared to be significant demand for learning provision to support the Assistant Practitioner role even though it had not yet been clearly articulated.

However, the audit of HE provision revealed that:

- there was little or no collaboration between HE providers regarding provision;
- there was no clarity about which specialisms HE providers could support;
- no common learning outcomes had been agreed for APs;
- there was no consistency about credit transfer to be awarded between institutions;
- there was limited opportunity for accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) or accreditation of in-house training;
- the range of sub-regional development needs identified were not being met.

The audit report recommended that, in order to move forward in a manageable way, a number of demonstrator projects be established based on current employer needs around which a framework could start to be shaped, and to open discussions with funding providers. Invitations were sent out to employers who had been involved in the consultation and three came forward: Calderdale and Huddersfield Foundation Trust, Bradford and Airedale Community Health Services, and Bradford District Community Trust. The demonstrator projects would be launched at a workshop involving a wider group of employers and HEIs.

Meanwhile an approach to the strategic health authority education commissioning team met with a very positive response; however, they felt that if they were to support such a framework, it would need to be extended beyond West Yorkshire to encompass the entire Yorkshire and Humber region. We noted that if it were to become a regional initiative, we would need to include other employers and institutions at an early stage so they would have the opportunity to contribute and shape the framework. As a result we amended our plan for the demonstrator launch so it became an event that could be opened up to a wider audience across the region and to which the Strategic Health Authority would invite Directors of Nursing and Directors of HR across Yorkshire and Humberside.

The University of Bradford was therefore the venue in June 2010 for a conference to launch the demonstrator projects, where each team, working on their own workforce development needs, would come together to work with learning providers and Sector Skills Councils to shape a collaborative flexible learning framework.

Reflecting the high level of interest among health care providers in developing Assistant Practitioners in the region, the event was attended by almost 50 representatives from NHS trusts and HE/FE institutions across Yorkshire and Humberside, together with Skills for Care, Skills for Health and other regional strategic bodies. Presentations on workforce modernisation, education commissioning, nationally transferable roles, not to mention the demonstrator projects themselves, all received considerable interest. Set in the current economic climate of austerity with a new Government in power announcing stringent public sector spending cuts and health service reform, the drive for efficiency and flexibility is clear. Many Yorkshire and Humberside HE institutions are now fully behind the project and understand the demand from employers for a regional, flexible, framework.



The value in such a framework will be in agreeing a recognised core of higher level skills across learning providers, whether the learning is delivered in-house, in the workplace, through an HEI or a combination of all three. This should increase the portability of skills and credit across the region. If a learner completes units in one part of the region, they are often required to repeat all or some of that training if they move elsewhere. However, a common framework with the means to accredit learning from elsewhere, would mean that their skills and knowledge could be more easily recognised by a new employer or learning provider, therefore supporting career progression. A further advantage is that additional specialist units can easily be developed drawing on the specialisms of different HEIs in order to provide a flexible skills mix. For learning providers who map their learning provision to the framework, it means that institutions can be confident they are providing courses that are fit for purpose and viable in relation to numbers, especially in the longer term as the anticipated future of the framework will include a wide variety of social care roles, and potentially children's services too. There will be challenges along the way, especially with regard to agreeing APEL and credit transfer, but employers are clearly behind the flexible learning agenda, and higher education providers are also keen to explore ways to work in partnership to provide a more seamless, efficient offer to employers in the region.

Subsequent to the June conference, a series of development workshops has now begun to progress the demonstrators and begin forming the flexible framework, and a project plan is being drawn up for this phase of the work. The work will build on other relevant projects such as the acclaimed Calderdale Framework and national development such as Skills for Health Nationally Transferable Roles (NTR). It is also expected that other demonstrators will start up in other parts of Yorkshire and Humberside to link in with the West Yorkshire projects.

What is exciting about this development is that it responds to needs of specific employers, to needs of learners and to economic priorities. It shows that providing opportunities for employers to influence learning provision can generate innovative and creative curriculum design. Those involved are learning about each other, discovering new ways of working and forming stronger partnerships. Projects such as this need to be driven and co-ordinated centrally but there are multiple rewards: positive outcomes from the project will not just be a flexible learning framework, but new dynamic relationships between institutions, Sector Skills Councils and employers in the sector and, ultimately, a more flexible, responsive service for users.

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